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CONFESSIONAL

And Other American Plays

BY

PERCIVAL WILDE



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To
WALTER
MORE THAN BROTHER—FRIEND



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PREFACE

TOGETHER WITH "THE SMILE OF RHADAMANTHOS,"
AN EGYPTIAN MORALITY, NOW FOR THE FIRST
(AND LAST) TIME ENGLISHED.

THE writer of one-act plays is in a peculiar position. No other department of the drama has been so long and so disastrously neglected. The world's great one-act plays may be checked off on the fingers of one hand. Schnitzler, Synge, perhaps Sudermann, and not more than one or two others may claim that they have done work of more than passing merit in this field; but the list ends there, and at that, it would be difficult to cite five titles without including plays whose right to figure in the illustrious minority would be very seriously and very justly questioned.

Where there are no standards, each must shift for himself. The writer of one-act plays must venture into uncharted seas. He must dare, as a man who knows not on which side the dangers lie, with the full knowledge that a mistake will be fatal.

Yet this is no unmitigated evil. He cannot profit by the faults of the past; but he can, nevertheless, com-

mit faults which others may avoid. It may be unfortunate for the individual; it cannot be so for the mass. In the last analysis bad writing is possibly as useful as good writing. The sure pilot who first steers a true course does not, perhaps, render so great a service to his successors as the unlucky navigator who comes to grief on a hidden rock, and remains, for years afterwards, a warning of what *not* to do.

To set a good example is excellent; but to set a bad example for the future admonition of others is an enduring benefit. Buoys mark dangers—not safety. The wake of him who has passed through unscathed is but a ripple on the face of the waters, useless except to his immediate followers. And the prudent voyager bears in mind that every passing gust also produces a ripple, and locates the channel by guiding between the wrecks on either side.

These premises, then, we take for granted: that the one-act play is an independent art form; that it is capable of producing effects totally foreign to the longer drama; that the very special class of material which naturally falls into the one-act play form can in no other way be as potently dealt with.

With much of the same false reasoning that holds that a story is the miniature of the novel, the one-act play has been considered a condensation of a larger work. Nothing could be more unjust. The one-act play moves within bounds of which the writer of long plays knows nothing. It is not an abbreviated play; much less, as a rule, is it the material out of which a longer

play can be made. Unity is its inspiration; unity is its aim; unity is its soul. Unity is at once its main-spring and its escapement, its motive power and its limitation. The swiftness of exposition, the brevity, the homogeneity of effect which insists that every word contribute towards that effect, these are necessities unknown to the more leisurely three- or four-acter. The entire first act of a long play may be given up to the narration of what has come before: the one-act play must accomplish this in a few minutes. If, in the course of the long play, the interest flag momentarily, little is lost. Should this occur, even for an instant, the one-act play is ruined. The long play has dispensed with the Greek unities: the one-act play is their slave. And not least important, the long play is punctuated by intermissions, during which the audience may reflect and digest: the one-act play is denied their help.

A single effect, conveyed powerfully or delicately, or poetically or rudely, or seriously or whimsically, according to the character of the effect itself; an instantaneous arrest of attention, a continued grasp, and relinquishment only after the curtain has fallen; this is the goal and the method of the true one-acter.

That it achieves its greatest effect on the stage, rather than in print, goes without saying. "A play," to quote Clayton Hamilton's comprehensive definition, "is a story devised to be presented by actors on a stage before an audience." Add to this its corollaries: that a play is essentially based upon crisis, and that it is very generally expressed in terms of emotion. Deduct

crisis, do away with emotion, and the play, as a play, has ceased to exist. The two are the foundation of all drama: the mathematics of Euclid or the philosophy of Kant, dramatized, would show both.

Crisis interpreted by emotion—our realization of the first, our feeling of the second, are increased when we share them with others. Points which escape us in the reading are obvious in the production; and these points, almost without exception, are those to which we apply the adjective "dramatic." When the Puritanical mother, in "Fanny's First Play," turns to the "daughter of joy" at the end of a violent scene with the extremely human question, "Where did you buy that white lace?" the audience chortles with delight at the fidelity of the characterization: it is an exquisitely true touch. In the printed play the line passes with scant attention. At the best it may evoke a smile from one of the unusual readers who can picture a situation in his mind's eye. But that is all.

Yet there are some who argue loudly for the so-called "closet drama"; that anomalous hybrid which written in the form of a play is not meant for production. There are literary cuckoos who decline to deposit their offspring on the properly labeled shelf, epic, narrative, or what not; who brand their productions "drama," and shun the only test of drama: the footlights; who, like our restaurants, serve us with shells of familiar animals filled with a meat, which however excellent in itself, belongs elsewhere. Wherefore the discreet author, sensible of his own unworthiness to hold forth on a subject which perplexes abler minds

than his, terminates his preface with a morality recently deciphered from the hieratic by a learned Egyptologist, and here, for the first time, offered for the delectation of a modern audience.

THE SMILE OF RHADAMANTHOS

So they came into the great hall, where sate the three mighty judges of the dead, even Rhadamanthos, and Minos, and Aeacos.

Then spake Rhadamanthos unto the first shade, and he answered him in fear and trembling:

—I, my lord, was an artist.

—An artist? challenged Aeacos, and his deep voice rumbled and echoed from the vaulted ceiling.

—A maker of pictures, added the shade, and his limbs quivered beneath him, aye, so that he scarce could stand upright.

—Then why dost thou tremble? demanded Minos.

And in that place where the truth must be spoken the voice of the maker of pictures made answer:

—I made pictures—beautiful pictures—but——

—But?

—But?

—But?

—They were not intended to be seen.

Then sighed the three judges, and Minos made a mark in the great book which lay open before him.

And Rhadamanthos waved the first shade aside, and turned unto the second:

—And what, in life, wast thou?

And the second made answer:

—I, my lord, was an artist.

—An artist? challenged Aeacos, and his terrible voice echoed and rumbled from the vaulted ceiling.

—A maker of music, added the shade, and his muscles were as wax when the fire burneth, aye, so that he barely could stand upright.

—Then why dost thou tremble? demanded Minos.

And in that place where the truth must be spoken the voice of the maker of music made answer:

—I made symphonies—beautiful symphonies—but——

—But?

—But?

—But?

—They were not intended to be heard.

Then sighed the three judges, and Minos made a second mark in the great book which lay open before him.

And Rhadamanthos waved the second shade aside, and turned unto the third:

—And what, in life, wast thou?

And the third shade made answer:

—I, my lord, was an artist.

—An artist? challenged Aeacos, and the voice of him echoed and re-echoed even as a voice of thunder from the vaulted ceiling.

—A maker of plays, added the shade, and his knees were as a jelly, aye, his spine was as a slender reed when the raging waters overwhelm it.

—Then why dost thou tremble? demanded Minos. And in that place where the truth must be spoken the voice of the maker of plays made answer:

—I made plays—beautiful plays—but——

—But?

—But?

—But?

—They were not intended to be acted.

Then sighed the three mighty judges, aye, sighed as when the wind of autumn sweeps through a forest of cedars. And Minos made so great a mark in the book which lay open before him that his graphite was severed asunder.

And then Rhadamanthos, chief of all the judges, waved the unhappy three before him.

—Thou, he spake, thou, the maker of things whose essence was in being seen, and yet were not to be seen, and thou, the maker of things whose essence was in being heard, and yet were not to be heard, proceed to the little room at the end of the hall.

And the miserable shades made obeisance.

—There, spake Rhadamanthos, will you find the shade of the great W. S. Gilbert, who, with the assistance of his Mikado, will determine the punishment to fit your crime. I have spoken.

And treading mightily on the tail of a sleeping thunderbolt, he sent for a messenger of ferocious aspect to conduct the culprits to their doom.

Then turned Rhadamanthos unto the shade of the maker of plays, whose teeth now chattered as if he were about to make a curtain speech.

—As for thee, spake Rhadamanthos, the maker of things whose essence was to be acted, and yet were not to be acted, who had the gift of creating life itself, but who created only a sham and a mockery of life, thy case will we judge ourselves.

So consulted Rhadamanthos with the other judges, aye, even with Minos, who in life ruled over Crete, and with Aeacos, son of Jupiter and Aegina.

And at length spake Rhadamanthos:

—Thou, maker of plays (and the attentive Minos wrote down each word of the inviolable decree), thou wilt prepare for publication by the Hades Press a complete edition of thy writings. They will be issued for subscribers only, on Japanese vellum, in twenty royal octavo volumes, richly bound in genuine crushed levant, top and side edges gilt, with blind tooling and inlaid doublures by the shade of Clovis Eve. There will be notes by twenty distinguished commentators, and there will be an engraved portrait of the author as frontispiece in each volume. I have spoken.

Then the shade of the amazed maker of plays, unable to believe his ears, turned unto the mighty Rhadamanthos:

—This, he asked, only this is to be my punishment?

—Only this, spake Rhadamanthos.

—I thank your excellencies, said the shade of the maker of plays, and bowing low, he was led away.

Then smiled Rhadamanthos, aye, and Minos, the just judge, and Aeacos, who in life erected the temple of Zeus Panhellenius, also smi * * * * *

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PREFACE

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Here, in the middle of a word, the palimpsest breaks off. But learned Egyptologists who are familiar with the publications of the Hades Press inform us that the richly bound volumes are invariably printed in invisible ink.

NEW YORK,

December, 1915.

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CONFSSIONAL

A PLAY

CHARACTERS

ROBERT BALDWIN.

MARTHA, his wife.

JOHN, his son.

EVIE, his daughter.

MARSHALL.

A MAID.

CONFESSIONAL

IT is a rather hot and sultry Sunday afternoon, and the sun overhead and the baked clay under foot are merciless. In the distance, lowering clouds give promise of coming relief. And at the parlor window of a trim little cottage the Baldwin family is anxiously awaiting the return of its head.

JOHN, the son, an average young man of twenty-seven, is smoking a pipe as philosophically as if this day were in no whit more momentous than any other. But his mother, trying to compose herself with her knitting, has made little progress in the last half hour; and EVIE, his sister, takes no pains to conceal her nervousness.

There is a tense pause. It seems as if none of them likes to break the silence. For the tenth time in ten minutes, EVIE goes to the window and looks out along the sultry road.

MARTHA

It's time he was home.

EVIE

Yes, mother.

MARTHA

I do hope he hasn't forgotten his umbrella: he has such a habit of leaving it behind him——

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EVIE

Yes, mother.

MARTHA

It might rain. Don't you think so, Evie? (*Without waiting for an answer she goes to the window and looks out anxiously.*) The sky is so dark. (*She starts.*) There was a flash of lightning! (JOHN rises slowly, moves to a center table, and knocks the ashes out of his pipe. His mother turns to him.) John, run into your father's room and see that the windows are closed. There's a good boy.

JOHN

Right-o. (*He goes.*)

EVIE

(*After a pause*)

Mother. (*There is no answer.*) Mother! (MRS. BALDWIN turns slowly.) What does Mr. Gresham want with him? Has he done anything wrong?

MARTHA

(*Proudly*)

Your father? No, Evie.

EVIE

Then why did Mr. Gresham send for him?

MARTHA

He wanted to talk to him.

EVIE

What about? Mr. Gresham has been arrested: they're going to try him to-morrow. What can he want with father?

MARTHA

Your father will have to testify.

EVIE

But he's going to testify *against* Mr. Gresham. Why should Mr. Gresham want to see him?

MARTHA

I don't know, Evie. You know, your father doesn't say much about his business affairs. (*She pauses.*) I didn't know there was anything wrong with the bank until I saw it in the papers. Your father wouldn't tell me to draw my money out—he thought it wasn't loyal to Mr. Gresham. (*EVIE nods.*) I did it of my own accord—against his wishes—when I suspected——

EVIE

(*After a pause*)

Do you think that father had anything to do with—— (*She does not like to say it.*)

MARTHA

With the wrecking of the bank? You know him better than that, Evie.

EVIE

But did he know what was going on? You know what the papers are saying——

MARTHA

They haven't been fair to him, Evie.

EVIE

Perhaps not. But they said he must have been a fool not to know. They said that only he could have known—he and Mr. Gresham. Why didn't he stop it?

MARTHA

He was acting under Mr. Gresham's orders.

EVIE

(Contemptuously)

Mr. Gresham's orders! Did he have to follow them?

MARTHA

(After a pause)

Evie, I don't believe your father ever did a wrong thing in his life—not if he knew it was wrong. He found out by accident—found out what Mr. Gresham was doing.

EVIE

How do you know that?

MARTHA

I don't know it: I suspect it—something he said. (*Eagerly.*) You see, Evie, he *can't* have done anything wrong. They haven't indicted him.

EVIE

(*Slowly*)

No. They didn't indict him—because they want him to testify against Mr. Gresham. That's little consolation, mother.

(JOHN *re-enters.*)

MARTHA

(*Seizing the relief*)

Were the windows open, John?

JOHN

(*Shortly*)

I've closed them. (*He crosses to the table, takes up his pipe, and refills it.*) Look here, mater: what does Gresham want with the governor?

EVIE

(*Nodding*)

I've just been asking that.

MARTHA

I don't know, John.

JOHN

Didn't you ask him? (*As she does not answer.*)
Well?

MARTHA

Yes, I asked him. He didn't say, John. (*Anxiously.*) I don't think he knew himself.

JOHN

(*After an instant's thought*)

I was talking to the assistant cashier yesterday.

EVIE

Donovan?

JOHN

Yes, Donovan. I saw him up at the Athletic Club. He said that nobody had any idea that there was anything wrong until the crash came. Donovan had been there eight years. He thought he was taken care of for the rest of his life. He had gotten married on the strength of it. And then, one morning, there was a sign up on the door. It was like a bolt out of a clear sky.

EVIE

And father?

JOHN

He says the governor must have known. He'll swear nobody else did. You see, father was closer to Gresham

than anyone else. That puts him in a nice position, doesn't it?

MARTHA

What do you mean, John?

JOHN

The governor the only witness against John Gresham—and me named after him! John Gresham Baldwin, at your service!

MARTHA

Your father will do his duty, John, no matter what comes of it.

JOHN

(*Shortly*)

I know it. And I'm not sure but what it's right. (*They look at him inquiringly.*) There's John Gresham, grown rich in twenty years, and the governor pegging along as his secretary at sixty dollars a week!

MARTHA

Your father never complained.

JOHN

No; that's just the pity of it. He didn't complain. Well, he'll have his chance to-morrow. He'll go on the stand, and when he's through, they'll put John

Gresham where he won't be able to hurt anybody for a while. Wasn't satisfied with underpaying his employés: had to rob his depositors! Serves him jolly well right!

MARTHA

(Rather timidly)

I don't think your father would like you to talk that way, John.

JOHN

(Shrugs his shoulders with a contemptuous:
"Humph!")

MARTHA

Your father has nothing against Mr. Gresham. He will tell the truth—nothing but the truth.

JOHN

Did you think I expected him to lie? Not father! He'll tell the truth: just the truth. It'll be plenty!

EVIE

(At the window)

There's father now!

(There is the click of a latchkey outside.

EVIE makes for the door.)

MARTHA

Evie! You stay here: let me talk to him first.

*(MARTHA hurries out. JOHN and EVIE
look at each other.)*

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JOHN

Wonder what Gresham had to say to him? (EVIE shrugs her shoulders. He turns away to the window.) It's started to rain.

EVIE

Yes.

(There is a pause. Suddenly JOHN crosses to the door, and flings it open.)

JOHN

Hullo, dad!

BALDWIN

(Coming in, followed by MARTHA)

How are you, my boy? (He shakes hands with JOHN.) Evie! (He kisses her.)

MARTHA

You are sure your shoes aren't wet, Robert?

BALDWIN

(Shaking his head)

I took the car. Not a drop on me. See?

(He passes his hands over his sleeves. He goes to a chair: sits. There is an awkward pause.)

JOHN

Well, dad? Don't you think it's about time you told us something?

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BALDWIN

Told you something? I don't understand, John.

JOHN

People have been talking about you—saying things——

BALDWIN

What kind of things, John?

JOHN

You can imagine: rotten things. And I couldn't contradict them.

BALDWIN

Why not, John?

JOHN

Because I didn't know.

BALDWIN

Did you *have* to know? Wasn't it enough that you knew your father?

JOHN

(*After a pause*)

I beg your pardon, sir.

BALDWIN

It was two days before the smash-up that I found out what Gresham was doing. (*He pauses. They are*

listening intently.) I told him he would have to make good. He said he couldn't——

EVIE

(As he does not continue)

And what happened?

BALDWIN

I told him he would have to do the best he could—and the first step would be to close the bank. He didn't want to do that.

MARTHA

But he did it.

BALDWIN

I made him do it. He was angry—very angry, but I had the whip hand.

EVIE

The papers didn't mention that.

BALDWIN

I didn't think it was necessary to tell them.

MARTHA

But you let your name rest under a cloud meanwhile.

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BALDWIN

It will be cleared to-morrow, won't it? (*He pauses.*) To-day Gresham sent for me. The trial begins in twenty-four hours. I'm the only witness against him. He asked—you can guess what——

JOHN

(*Indignantly*)

He wanted you to lie to save his skin, eh? Wanted you to perjure yourself?

BALDWIN

That wouldn't be necessary, John. He just wanted me to have an attack of poor memory. If I tell all I know, John Gresham will go to jail—no power on earth can save him from it. But he wants me to forget a little—just the essential things. When they question me I can answer "I don't remember." They can't prove I *do* remember. And there you are.

JOHN

It would be a lie, dad!

BALDWIN

(*Smiling*)

Of course. But it's done every day. And they couldn't touch *me*—any more than they could convict him.

MARTHA

(Quivering with indignation)

How dared he—how dared he ask such a thing——!

EVIE

What did you say, father?

BALDWIN

(Smiling, and raising his eyes to JOHN's)

Well, son, what would *you* have said?

JOHN

I'd have told him to go to the devil!

BALDWIN

(Nodding)

I did.

JOHN

Bully for you, governor!

MARTHA

(Half to herself)

I knew! I knew!

BALDWIN

I didn't use your words, John. He's too old a friend of mine for that. But I didn't mince matters any. He understood what I meant.

EVIE

And what did he say then?

BALDWIN

There wasn't much to say. You see, he wasn't surprised. He's known me for thirty-five years, and, well, (*with simple pride*) anybody who's known me for thirty-five years doesn't expect me to haggle with my conscience. If it had been anybody else than John Gresham I would have struck him across the face. But John Gresham and I were boys together. We worked side by side. And I've been in his employ ever since he started in for himself. He is desperate—he doesn't know what he is doing—or he wouldn't have offered me money.

JOHN

(*Furious*)

Offered you money, dad?

BALDWIN

He'd put it aside, ready for the emergency. If they don't convict him, he'll hand it over to me. The law can't stop him. But if I live until to-morrow night, they *will* convict him! (*He sighs.*) God knows I want no share in bringing about his punishment—— (*He breaks off.* EVIE *pats his hand silently.*) Young man and old man, I've worked with him or for him the best part of my life. I'm loyal to him—I've always

been loyal to him—but when John Gresham ceases to be an honest man, John Gresham and I part company!

MARTHA

(Weeping softly)

Robert! Robert!

BALDWIN

I've got only a few years to live, but I'll live those as I've lived the rest of my life. I'll go to my grave clean! *(He rises presently, goes to the window, and looks out.)* The rain's stopped, hasn't it?

EVIE

(Following him and taking his hand)

Yes, father.

BALDWIN

It'll be a fine day to-morrow.

(There is a pause.)

JOHN

Dad.

BALDWIN

Yes?

JOHN

What did Gresham offer you?

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BALDWIN

(Simply)

A hundred thousand dollars.

EVIE

What?!

MARTHA

Robert!

BALDWIN

He put it aside for me without anybody knowing it. It's out of his private fortune, he says. It's not the depositors' money—as if that made any difference.

EVIE

(As if hypnotized)

He offered you a hundred thousand dollars?

BALDWIN

(Smiling at her amazement)

I could have had it for the one word "Yes"—or even for nodding my head—or a look of the eyes.

JOHN

How—how do you know he meant it?

BALDWIN

His word is good.

JOHN

Even now?

BALDWIN

He never lied to me, John. (*He pauses.*) I suppose my eyes must have shown something I didn't feel. He noticed it. He unlocked a drawer and *showed* me the hundred thousand.

JOHN

In cash?

BALDWIN

In thousand-dollar bills. They were genuine: I examined them.

EVIE

(*Slowly*)

And for that he wants you to say "I don't remember."

BALDWIN

(*Smiling*)

Just that: three words only.

JOHN

But you won't?

BALDWIN

(*Shaking his head*)

Those three words would choke me if I tried to speak them. For some other man, perhaps, it would be easy.

But for me? All of my past would rise up and strike me in the face. It would mean to the world that for years I had been living a lie: that I was not the honorable man I thought I was. When John Gresham offered me money, I was angry. But when I rejected it, and he showed no surprise, then I was pleased. It was a compliment, don't you think so?

JOHN

(*Slowly*)

Rather an expensive compliment.

BALDWIN

Eh?

JOHN

A compliment which cost you a hundred thousand dollars.

BALDWIN

A compliment which was *worth* a hundred thousand dollars. I've never had that much money to spend in my life, John, but if I had I couldn't imagine a finer way to spend it.

JOHN

(*Slowly*)

Yes. I suppose so.

MARTHA

(After a pause)

Will the depositors lose much, Robert?

BALDWIN

(Emphatically.)

The depositors will not lose a cent.

EVIE

(Surprised)

But the papers said——

BALDWIN

(Interrupting)

They had to print something: they guessed. *I* know.
I tell you.

MARTHA

But you never said so before.

BALDWIN

I left that for Gresham. It will come out to-morrow.

JOHN

Why to-morrow? Why didn't you say so before?
The papers asked you often enough.

BALDWIN

Nothing forced me to answer, John.

JOHN

That wasn't your real reason, was it, dad? You knew the papers would keep right on calling you names. (BALDWIN *does not answer.* JOHN'S *face lights up with sudden understanding.*) You wanted to let Gresham announce it himself: because it will be something in his favor! Eh?

BALDWIN

Yes. . . . We were able to save something from the wreck, Gresham and I. It was more than I had expected—almost twice as much—and with what Gresham has it will be enough.

EVIE

Even without the hundred thousand?

(BALDWIN *does not answer.*)

JOHN

(*Insistently*)

Without the money that Gresham had put away for you?

BALDWIN

Yes. I didn't know there *was* the hundred thousand until to-day. Gresham didn't tell me. We reckoned without it.

EVIE

Oh!

JOHN

And you made both ends meet?

BALDWIN

Quite easily. (*He smiles.*) Marshall is running the re-organization; Marshall of the Third National. He hasn't the least idea that it's going to turn out so well.

(*There is a pause.*)

JOHN

They're going to punish Gresham, aren't they?

BALDWIN

I'm afraid so.

JOHN

What for?

BALDWIN

Misappropriating the funds of the——

JOHN

(*Interrupting*)

Oh, I know that. But what *crime* has he committed?

BALDWIN

That's a crime, John.

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EVIE

But if nobody loses anything by it?

BALDWIN

It's a crime nevertheless.

JOHN

And they're going to *punish* him for it!

BALDWIN

They can't let him go, John. He's too conspicuous.

JOHN

Do you think that's right, governor?

BALDWIN

My opinion doesn't matter, John.

JOHN

But what do you think?

BALDWIN

I think—I think that I'm sorry for John Gresham—terribly sorry.

JOHN

(*Slowly*)

It's nothing but a technicality, dad. Nobody loses a cent. It's rather hard on Gresham, I say.

BALDWIN
(*After a pause*)

Yes, John.

EVIE
(*Timidly*)

Would it be such an awful thing, father, if you let him off?

BALDWIN
(*Smiling*)

I wish I could, Evie. But I'm not the judge.

EVIE
No, but——

BALDWIN
But what?

EVIE
You're the only witness against him.

BALDWIN
(*Nonplussed*)

Evie!

JOHN
She's right, governor.

BALDWIN
You too, John?

JOHN

It's going to be a nasty mess if they put John Gresham in jail—with your own son named after him! It's going to be pleasant for *me*! John Gresham Baldwin!

MARTHA

(After a pause)

Robert, I'm not sure I understood what you said before. What did Mr. Gresham want you to do for him?

BALDWIN

Get him off to-morrow.

MARTHA

You could do that?

BALDWIN

Yes.

MARTHA

How?

BALDWIN

By answering "I don't remember" when they ask me dangerous questions.

MARTHA

Oh! And you *do* remember?

BALDWIN

Yes. Nearly everything.

JOHN

No matter what they ask you?

BALDWIN

I can always refresh my memory. You see, I have notes.

JOHN

But without those notes you wouldn't remember?

BALDWIN

What do you mean, John?

JOHN

(Without answering)

As a matter of fact, you will have to rely on your notes nearly altogether, won't you?

BALDWIN

Everybody else does the same thing.

JOHN

Then it won't be far from the truth if you say "I don't remember"?

MARTHA

I don't see that Mr. Gresham is asking so much of you.

BALDWIN

Martha!

MARTHA

Robert, I'm as honorable as you are——

BALDWIN

That goes without saying, Martha.

MARTHA

It doesn't seem right to me to send an old friend to jail. (*As he speaks she holds up her hand.*) Now don't interrupt me! I've been thinking. The day John was baptized: when Mr. Gresham stood sponsor for him: how proud we were! And when we came home from the church you said—do you remember what you said, Robert?

BALDWIN

No. What was it?

MARTHA

You said, "Martha, may our son always live up to the name which we have given him!" Do you remember that?

BALDWIN

Yes—dimly.

JOHN

Ha! Only *dimly*, governor?

BALDWIN

What do you mean, John?

MARTHA

(Giving JOHN no opportunity to answer)

It would be sad—very sad—if the name of John Gresham, our son's name, should come to grief through you, Robert.

BALDWIN

(After a pause)

Martha, are you telling me to accept the bribe money that John Gresham offered me?

EVIE

Why do you call it bribe money, father?

BALDWIN

(Bitterly)

Why indeed? Gresham had a prettier name for it. He said that he had underpaid me all these years. You know, I was getting only sixty dollars a week when the crash came——

JOHN

(Impatiently)

Yes, yes?

BALDWIN

He said a hundred thousand represented the difference between what he had paid me and what I had actually been worth to him.

MARTHA

That's no less than true, Robert. You've worked for him very faithfully.

BALDWIN

He said that if he had paid me what he should have, I would have put by more than a hundred thousand by now.

JOHN

That's so, isn't it, dad?

BALDWIN

Who knows? I never asked him to raise my salary. When he raised it it was of his own accord. (*There is a pause. He looks around.*) Well, what do you think of it, Evie?

EVIE

(*Hesitantly*)

If you go on the stand to-morrow——

BALDWIN

Yes?

EVIE

And they put John Gresham in jail, what will people say?

BALDWIN

They will say I have done my duty, Evie; no more and no less.

EVIE

Will they?

BALDWIN

Why, what should they say?

EVIE

I don't think so, of course, but other people might say that you had turned traitor to your best friend.

BALDWIN

You don't mean that, Evie?

EVIE

When they find out that they haven't lost any money—when John Gresham tells them that he will pay back every cent—then they won't *want* him to go to jail. They'll feel sorry for him.

BALDWIN

Yes, I believe that. I hope so.

JOHN

And they won't feel too kindly disposed towards the man who helps put him in jail.

MARTHA

They'll say you went back on an old friend, Robert.

JOHN

When you pull out your notes in court, to be *sure* of sending him to jail——!

(He breaks off with a snort.)

EVIE

And Mr. Gresham hasn't done anything really wrong.

JOHN

It's a technicality, that's what it is. Nobody loses a cent. Nobody wants to see him punished.

EVIE

Except you, father.

JOHN

Yes. And you're willing to jail the man after whom you named your son!

MARTHA

(After a pause)

I believe in being merciful, Robert.

BALDWIN

Merciful?

MARTHA

Mr. Gresham has always been very good to you.

(There is another pause. Curiously enough, they do not seem to be able to meet each other's eyes.)

MARTHA

Ah, well! What are you going to do now, Robert?

BALDWIN

What do you mean?

MARTHA

You have been out of work since the bank closed.

BALDWIN

(Shrugging his shoulders)

Oh, I'll find a position.

MARTHA

(Shaking her head)

At your age——?

BALDWIN

It's the *man* that counts.

CONFESSIONAL

MARTHA

Yes. You said that a month ago.

JOHN

I heard from Donovan——

BALDWIN

(Quickly)

What did you hear?

JOHN

He's gone with the Third National, you know.

BALDWIN

Yes; he's helping with the re-organization.

JOHN

They wouldn't take you on there——

BALDWIN

Their staff was full. They couldn't very well offer me a position as a clerk.

JOHN

That was what they told *you*.

BALDWIN

Wasn't it true?

JOHN

(*Shakes his head*)

Marshall said he wouldn't employ a man who was just as guilty as John Gresham.

BALDWIN

But I'm not!

JOHN

Who knows it?

BALDWIN

Everybody will to-morrow!

JOHN

Will they believe you? Or will they think you're trying to save your *own* skin?

BALDWIN

I found out only a day before the smash.

JOHN

Who will believe that?

BALDWIN

They will *have* to!

JOHN

How will you make them? I'm afraid you'll find that against you wherever you go, governor. Your

testifying against John Gresham won't make things any better. If you ever get another job, it will be with *him!* (*This is a startling idea to BALDWIN, who shows his surprise.*) If Gresham doesn't go to jail, he'll start in business again, won't he? And he can't offer you anything less than a partnership.

BALDWIN

A partnership?

JOHN

(*With meaning*)

With the hundred thousand capital you could put in the business, dad.

BALDWIN

John!

JOHN

Of course, the capital doesn't matter. He'll owe you quite a debt of gratitude besides.

(*There is a pause.*)

MARTHA

A hundred thousand would mean a great deal to us, Robert. If you don't find a position soon John will have to support us.

JOHN

On thirty dollars a week, dad.

EVIE

That won't go very far.

MARTHA

It's not fair to John.

JOHN

(*Angrily*)

Oh, don't bother about *me*.

(*EVIE begins to weep.*)

JOHN

Look here, governor, you've said nothing to the papers. If you say nothing more to-morrow what does it amount to but sticking to your friend? It's the square thing to do—he'd do as much for you.

BALDWIN

(*Looks appealingly from one face to another. They are averted. Then:*)

You—you want me to take this money? (*There is no answer.*) Say "Yes," one of you. (*Still no answer.*) Or "No." (*A long pause. Finally.*) I couldn't go into partnership with Gresham.

MARTHA

(*Promptly*)

Why not?

BALDWIN

People wouldn't trust him.

JOHN

Then you could go into business with someone else, dad. A hundred thousand is a lot of money.

BALDWIN

(Walks to the window. Looks out)

God knows I never thought this day would come! I know—I know no matter how you try to excuse it—I know that if I take this money I do a dishonorable thing. And you know it! You, and you, and you! All of you! Come, admit it!

JOHN

(Resolutely)

Nobody'll ever hear of it.

BALDWIN

But amongst ourselves, John! Whatever we are to the world, let us be honest with each other, the four of us! Well? *(His glance travels from JOHN to EVIE, whose head is bowed; from her to his wife, who is apparently busied with her knitting. He raises MARTHA'S head: looks into the eyes. He shudders.)* Shams! Liars! Hypocrites! Thieves! And I no better than any of you! We have seen our souls naked, and they stink to Almighty Heaven! Well, why don't you answer me?

MARTHA

(Feebly)

It's not wrong, Robert.

BALDWIN

It's not right.

JOHN

(Facing him steadily)

A hundred thousand is a lot of money, dad.

BALDWIN

(Nodding slowly)

You can look into my eyes *now*, my son, can't you?

JOHN

(Without moving)

Dad: why did you refuse? Wasn't it because you were afraid of what *we'd* say?

BALDWIN

(After a long pause)

Yes, John.

JOHN

Well, nobody will ever know it.

BALDWIN

Except the four of us.

JOHN

Yes—father.

(Abruptly they separate. EVIE weeps in silence. MARTHA, being less emotional, blows her nose noisily, and fumbles with her knitting. JOHN, having nothing better to do, scowls out of the window, and BALDWIN, near the fireplace, clenches and unclenches his hands.)

JOHN

Someone's coming.

MARTHA

(Raising her head)

Who is it?

JOHN

I can't see. *(With sudden apprehension.)* It looks like Marshall.

BALDWIN

Marshall?

(The door-bell rings. They are motionless as a MAID enters at one side and goes out the other. The MAID re-enters.)

THE MAID

A gentleman to see you, sir.

BALDWIN

(Pulling himself together)

Who, me?

THE MAID

Yes, sir.

(She hands him a card on a salver.)

BALDWIN

It is Marshall.

MARTHA

The President of the Third National?

BALDWIN

Yes. What does he want here?

THE MAID

Shall I show him in, sir?

BALDWIN

Yes. Yes. By all means.

(The MAID goes out.)

MARTHA

(Crossing to him quickly)

Robert! Be careful of what you say: you're to go on the stand to-morrow.

CONFESSIONAL

BALDWIN

(Nervously)

Yes, yes. I'll look out.

(The MAID re-enters, opening the door for MARSHALL.)

MARSHALL

(Coming into the room very buoyantly)

Well, well, spending the afternoon indoors? How are you, Mrs. Baldwin? *(He shakes hands cordially.)* And you, Baldwin?

MARTHA

We were just going out. Come, Evie.

MARSHALL

Oh, you needn't go on my account. You can hear what I have to say. *(He turns to the head of the family.)* Baldwin, if you feel like coming around to the Third National some time this week, you'll find a position waiting for you.

BALDWIN

(Thunderstruck)

Do you mean that, Mr. Marshall?

MARSHALL

(Smiling)

I wouldn't say it if I didn't. *(He continues more seriously.)* I was in to see Gresham this afternoon.

He told me about the offer he had made you. But he knew that no amount of money would make you do something you thought wrong. Baldwin, he paid you the supreme compliment: rather than go to trial with you to testify against him, he confessed.

BALDWIN

(Sinking into a chair)

Confessed!

MARSHALL

Told the whole story. *(He turns to MARTHA.)* I can only say to you what every man will be saying to-morrow: how highly I honor and respect your husband! How sincerely——

MARTHA

(Seizing his hand piteously)

Please! Please! Can't you see he's crying?

THE CURTAIN FALLS SLOWLY

THE VILLAIN IN THE PIECE
AN UNROMANTIC COMEDY

CHARACTERS

BLANCHE.

RALPH.

BELDEN.



THE VILLAIN IN THE PIECE

TO call her pretty, and say no more, would be an insult. She is young, twenty or twenty-one, and the determined chin, the challenging eyes, the resolute mouth, bespeak character first—beauty afterwards. One might describe the face by saying that it is beautiful as a matter of course—because there is so much else to it, because intelligence, comprehension, sympathy, beautify the features in which they reside.

Aristocrat? Not in the sense that the word was once used. She is the healthy, high-class American girl, who cares less for her ancestors than for her descendants. She will cheer herself hoarse at a football game in the afternoon, and forget the world and all else in the magic of a symphony in the evening—because she thinks she understands both—and understands neither—and enjoys life excellently well anyhow.

The captiously inclined will lay weight upon her frivolities, for, being a healthy animal, she must have her play. The over-educated, for whose opinion no one cares, will say she is superficial—which is perfectly true. And the superficial, whose opinion everyone repeats, will say that she is exceedingly good company—which is quite as true. But that is as it should be.

She has intimate friends, whom she changes with

commendable regularity, and she has enemies, whom she hates whole-heartedly and with abiding satisfaction. And she is human, very, very human.

As the curtain rises she is sitting on a sofa in a pleasant corner just outside of the ballroom in which eighty or a hundred couples are conscientiously threading the mazes of the latest modern dance. Through the open doorway come attenuated strains of music—and the rustle of silk—and the shuffle of dancing slippers—and the eddying hum of chatter. But she is listening to none of these. She is listening to the very earnest young man beside her. And she feels something of pity—and something of resentment—and more than something of understanding. For RALPH is certainly not an unattractive fellow, and when he speaks of love, as he has been doing for the last few minutes, his voice has gentle inflections and subtle catches which are decidedly pleasing—not least to the girl who is the object of his affection. He has just asked her a question—the question—and she pauses before replying. He whispers:

RALPH

Well, Blanche?

BLANCHE

(Shaking her head)

Ralph, it's too late.

RALPH

But——

BLANCHE

I didn't intend to tell you so soon: I'm engaged to him.

RALPH

Engaged?

BLANCHE

(Looking away)

For the last month.

RALPH

Oh, I thought so! I suspected it! I knew that would happen!

BLANCHE

Why, Ralph!

RALPH

(Bitterly)

I never had a chance. I should have known it from the start! When you had to choose between us, between me and my employer, between the little I offered you and a town house and a country house and——

BLANCHE

(Interrupting indignantly)

Ralph! How dare you!

RALPH

Oh, I know you don't think of money, but it makes a difference. It's got to make a difference.

BLANCHE

It makes no difference here, Ralph.

RALPH

No? We're pretty good friends, aren't we? Can you look at me and tell me——

BLANCHE

(Interrupting)

That I would marry him if he didn't have a cent? Yes. You don't know the man, Ralph. You don't give him credit for what he has.

RALPH

After I've worked for him for four years? I give him credit, never fear! Two millions—or perhaps three——

BLANCHE

That was not what I meant—you know that. He is an exceptional man—a big man—a just man——

RALPH

Who will treat you more as his daughter than his wife. He's old enough, isn't he?

BLANCHE

That's not fair, Ralph. He's thirty-seven.

RALPH

Ten years older than I. Blanche, Blanche, won't you listen to me? (*She sighs. He seizes the opportunity.*) Don't you remember? Two years ago?

BLANCHE

Of course I remember, Ralph.

RALPH

That was before you had met Belden. You said you would marry me.

BLANCHE

I meant it then.

RALPH

So—so things have changed?

BLANCHE

(*Slowly*)

Yes, Ralph.

RALPH

I suppose I was a fool. I wasn't making much: still less than I am making now, and I didn't see how I could marry you and keep my self-respect.

BLANCHE

I would have been willing.

RALPH

I knew that: you said so then. But I didn't dare. I didn't feel it was the right thing by you. I felt the only fair thing to do was to release you from your engagement.

BLANCHE

I didn't ask you to do it, Ralph.

RALPH

No. (*He pauses.*) Blanche, can't we go back? Back to where we left off?

BLANCHE

After I am engaged to marry another man?

RALPH

Whom you don't love.

BLANCHE

Whom I *do* love. . . . Ralph, even if it hurts you, make up your mind that I love him, the man he is, even more than I ever loved you. (*She pauses.*) Be a good loser, Ralph.

RALPH

The flowers, the automobiles, the opera—they had nothing to do with it? You know, when we went out together, you and I, we rode in the street cars.

BLANCHE

I enjoyed myself just as much, Ralph.

RALPH

I wonder! If I had had money! If I had been able to offer you what he offers you——

BLANCHE

You would have married me two years ago.

RALPH

Yes: and you would marry me to-day.

(The tall, powerful figure of GEOFFREY BELDEN has appeared in the doorway. Masterful, self-contained, but giving the impression of immense reserve force, he enters as if he were looking for a quiet place to idle away a few minutes. A self-made man, if ever there was one, with the confidence, the absolute assurance that comes with success written large over his features. RALPH'S voice catches his ear. He turns toward him. Then, as he gathers the drift of his words, he becomes motionless and listens—listens shamelessly.)

His entrance has been unobserved: the others are intent in their conversation.)

RALPH

Oh, I know how fair and square you are. I know how little you care about such things. But somewhere,

somewhere in the depths of your soul something is saying to you, "I am marrying a millionaire! He is Ralph's employer. He can buy out Ralph a dozen times, a hundred times, and never feel it. I am doing well for myself!"

BLANCHE

(*Indignantly*)

If you think *that*——

RALPH

(*Interrupting*)

I know that's not why you accepted him, but it counted—it had to count. When you spent an evening with him you enjoyed it, but you didn't stop to figure out how much of that enjoyment came from the things his money gave you. You left the house in the automobile his money placed at your service. You enjoyed the play, because his money bought the best seats in the theater. You had a little dinner afterwards, in the most expensive restaurant he could find. You had a perfect evening. When you thanked him for it, you meant it. But you didn't say to yourself "His money has given me nine-tenths of it—and I enjoyed his company—*of course*." You didn't stop to think that you would have enjoyed such an evening with any man.

BLANCHE

(*Rather sharply*)

Ralph, why do you say this to me?

RALPH

Why not?

BLANCHE

It's silly. (*He tries to interrupt. She will not allow it.*) I am not a child. I know why I'm marrying him—you don't. (*He laughs derisively.*) You're making a fool of yourself, Ralph!

RALPH

(*Bitterly*)

What does it matter?

BLANCHE

(*Rising angrily*)A woman can't even *respect* a man who does that!

(*She sweeps out of the room magnificently.*

RALPH *hesitates; then starts to follow her.*

BELDEN'S *powerful figure abruptly interposes itself.*)

RALPH

(*Starting violently*)

You!

BELDEN

(*Nodding calmly*)

Quite so.

RALPH

You've been listening?

BELDEN

I beg your pardon?

RALPH

Oh, don't beat around the bush! You've been listening at the door?

BELDEN

(Pleasantly)

Eavesdropping? Yes.

RALPH

How long?

BELDEN

Quite a while. Long enough to get the gist of what you were saying.

RALPH

And you, *you* are the man she wants to marry!

BELDEN

I hope so.

RALPH

A man who doesn't scruple to listen at keyholes——

BELDEN

(Indicating the doorway)

There isn't any.

RALPH

You know what I mean. A man who spies on his fiancée! What a rotten thing to do!

BELDEN

Contemptible, isn't it?

RALPH

Ha! You admit it!

BELDEN

Admit it? Why not? (*He laughs.*) Look here: I'm engaged to a girl. I intend to marry her. I leave her alone a few minutes. I come back to find one of my clerks making love to her: trying to induce her to marry *him*. What do you expect me to do? Wait politely till he's finished? *Not* listen? Or act as if I had heard nothing? Good Lord, man, I've got red blood in my veins! I *love* the girl. Have it your own way. Say it's wrong to listen. But I'm going to listen anyhow!

RALPH

(*Contemptuously*)

You don't trust her even now.

BELDEN

Trust her? I should say not! *You* trusted her and she got engaged to *me*. A man who has so little inter-

est in a girl that he *trusts* her doesn't deserve to marry her. Have you ever looked at it in that light?

RALPH

I should hope not.

BELDEN

Of course not, or she'd have been married to you by now. (*He seats himself amicably.*) Come, let's have it out. Forget that I'm paying you a salary. This is man to man. *She* hasn't done you any injustice: *I* have.

RALPH

What do you mean?

BELDEN

I cut you out, didn't I? (*He settles himself comfortably.*) You love her? Don't be afraid to speak out before me.

RALPH

(*Mastering himself with an effort*)

Yes, sir. I—I love her.

BELDEN

Flattering to my taste. Thank you. And as for the other side of it, does she love you?

(RALPH *hesitates.*)

BELDEN

This is no time for modesty. She loves you?

RALPH

I think so.

BELDEN

You are *sure* of it!

RALPH

(*Resolutely*)

I am sure of it!

BELDEN

Well, well!

RALPH

She was willing to marry me two years ago, and then——

(*He hesitates again.*)

BELDEN

Well, what is it?

RALPH

I don't think she cares for you any more than she did for me. It's just the way you did it.

BELDEN

My business methods?

RALPH

Exactly.

BELDEN

By virtue of which I am engaged to her now.

RALPH

Unfortunately.

BELDEN

Yes. (*He pauses.*) The decent thing to do would be to release her. What do you think?

RALPH

(*Eagerly*)

You would do that?

BELDEN

(*Thoughtfully.*)

It would be the proper thing. And then, I am a rich man. You are not. You feel it is the money that makes the difference.

RALPH

She is not marrying you for your money, sir.

BELDEN

(*Nodding gravely*)

I am glad to know it. But the question of money is simple. I have more than I know what to do with.

What would you say if, for instance, I were to hand you a hundred thousand——

RALPH

(*Dazed*)

A hundred thousand?

BELDEN

Or twice as much. Merely as a loan, you know. If I were to say, "Young man, take this money. Go into business with it. Be successful. I will help you to be successful. And at the end of six months, come back and let her choose between us."

RALPH

Mr. Belden!

BELDEN

Eliminate the money question. Put ourselves on a more equal basis.

RALPH

What a generous thing to do! What a magnificent thing!

BELDEN

(*Thoughtfully*)

Isn't it?

RALPH

I will make a success! I know I will make a success! I can't help it! And at the end of six months I will come back and she will choose—choose between you and me!

BELDEN

Sounds well, doesn't it? But what makes you think you'll be successful?

RALPH

(*Enthusiastically*)

With *her* to work for?

BELDEN

You've had her to work for for the last four years, haven't you? And I've raised you just once. I made up my mind to fire you twice.

RALPH

Mr. Belden!

BELDEN

You don't imagine that you're worth what I'm paying you to-day, do you? (*He pauses.*) Come back to the subject. It would be taking a risk, wouldn't it?

RALPH

A wonderful risk!

BELDEN

(Doubtfully)

Wonderful? No. Just a risk. If you fail, I lose my money. If you succeed, she might not choose me.

RALPH

But a risk with your eyes open!

BELDEN

(Nodding emphatically)

That is the kind of a risk I never take. It's a pity.

RALPH

(Not understanding)

A pity?

BELDEN

A great pity.

RALPH

I don't follow you.

BELDEN

That I'm not going to do it.

RALPH

(Thunderstruck)

Not going to do it?

BELDEN

It would be taking a chance. I never take a chance when I can help it. (*He glances curiously at RALPH.*) You didn't think I was serious, did you?

RALPH

(Words failing him)

Serious? Serious!

BELDEN

(Mildly)

I read something like it in a book—that was all. I was just thinking it would have been a heroic thing to do. It would have been generous—as *you* said, magnificent.

RALPH

You're *not* going to do it?

BELDEN

Not while I am sane. I tell you, though, I'd like to see someone *else* do it!

RALPH

(Furiously)

What are *you* going to do?

BELDEN

(Mildly)

I? I'm not cut out for a hero. I'm going to play safe: marry her just as soon as she'll let me.

RALPH

And take advantage of your position?

BELDEN

(Nodding)

Every inch of it.

RALPH

I thought——

BELDEN

(Interrupting)

Yes, I know you did.

RALPH

And instead——

BELDEN

(Again interrupting)

You find that I'm just an ordinary business man?

RALPH

You go about this——

BELDEN

(Continuing to interrupt)

As I go about business? Yes. You see, I know what you want to say. When I want something, I get it—if it is to be gotten—by the surest means I know.

RALPH

And you go after a wife exactly as you go after an extra million?

BELDEN

Exactly? No. Ten times as hard.

RALPH

Ah! If she knew that!

BELDEN

Don't mistake me! The extra million doesn't mean much, still I work pretty hard to get it. The wife means a great deal—*so* much that it almost frightens me to think about it. And you want me to worry about fairness? Or politeness? Or about giving the other fellow an equal chance? Not if I am sure that the girl is the right girl! (*He leans forward confidentially.*) You see, if I *don't* make the extra million there are plenty more where it came from: every dollar's just like every other dollar. But if I don't get the girl——! Well, the man behind the counter would say, "We happen to be *out* of this particular number." And I don't want anything else! I'm a devilish hard customer to satisfy. You see? (*He smiles reminiscently.*) When I was a boy they fed me on hero stories: my father said it would be good for my character. They didn't have to ram them down my throat either. I just devoured them! George Washington, Bayard, Joan of Arc, why, I could have told you the

maiden names of their maternal grandmothers, that's how well I knew them! And G. A. Henty—and Oliver Optic—and Frank Castlemon—and Horatio Alger? I can tell you half of their plots to-day! I've got some of those books yet, and I take them down once in a while, read them, just for the sake of the pleasure they used to give me when I was a boy! You never read them, did you?

RALPH

(*Stiffly*)

I don't see what that has to do with the case.

BELDEN

No: *you* wouldn't. But *I* see. (*He pauses.*) I always admired the hero. He was so good—so truthful—so manly! When his worst enemy got into a scrape, he would say "I did it." That was the hero's business in life, saying "I did it." When his brother forged a will, or somebody ran off with the bank's money, there was the hero: "I did it." But you knew he didn't. And you knew he'd be set right in the end! There had to be a happy ending: I knew that by the time I was twelve. So I was thrilled when he was shipwrecked—or marooned—or sentenced to be shot—because I *knew* he'd come out right side up! Why, I wallowed in it! And when some other fellow wanted his girl—do you follow me?—did he say "Don't bother me!"? No! That wasn't heroic. He said, "Let the best man win!" and he was perfectly safe in saying

it because the cards were stacked—and he *knew* it! Because he was the best man, and he *had* to win, or there'd have been no story! He took a chance—which wasn't any chance at all—just to thrill the reader, because he was nothing but a character in a book, and had an author looking out for him anyway! (*He stops and looks keenly into RALPH'S eyes.*) Do you understand? When it comes to real life, when it is a question of yours truly, Geoffrey Belden, he doesn't *take* a chance! It's a *real* chance, and he doesn't *want* to be thrilled! It's just possible there *mightn't* be a happy ending! The hero in the book had his author to depend upon: Geoffrey Belden has to look out for himself! (*He bows elaborately.*) I'm the villain in the piece!

RALPH

I know that already.

BELDEN

(*Carefully lighting a cigarette*)

I've been something of a hard worker in my day, and one result of it is that I can do things to-day I couldn't do before. I can be unfair when it is to my interest to be unfair. People were damn unfair to *me* when I was a young fellow.

BLANCHE

(*Enters the room, wearing a cloak over her evening gown*) .

I've been hunting for you everywhere, Geoffrey.

BELDEN

You come in good time. (*He faces RALPH.*) I want something now. I want it badly. So I warn you to do the decent thing.

RALPH

Warn?

BELDEN

That was the word.

RALPH

When you don't do the decent thing yourself?

BELDEN

(*With an explanatory smile*)

I'm the villain. I warn you to give in with good grace: to congratulate me on my engagement.

RALPH

(*Laughing contemptuously*)

Congratulate you! Just watch me!

BELDEN

It's gentlemanly: you seem keen on that.

RALPH

Are you joking?

BELDEN

(Shrugs his shoulders hopelessly: his whole attitude changes)

I never joke with my employés.

RALPH

(Flushing)

Mr. Belden!

BELDEN

Rotten thing to say, isn't it? But doesn't it strike you that you're a good deal of a cad yourself?

RALPH

What do you mean? This isn't your office, you know.

BELDEN

(Nodding)

That's just the point. You wouldn't act like this with another man, but I'm your employer, and etiquette says I mustn't discharge you.

RALPH

It would be contemptible.

BELDEN

That's why I'm going to do it. It takes a brave man to do a contemptible thing.

RALPH

Discharge me? You daren't!

BELDEN

No? It's wrong. It's outrageous. It's despicable. But I warned you I was the villain.

RALPH

And you mean to——? (*He turns passionately to BLANCHE.*) And you, you listen to all of this, and say nothing? Can't I say to him, "Keep your money! We have each other!"?

(*He seizes her hand.*)

BLANCHE

(*Withdrawing her hand*)

I'm afraid you can't, Ralph.

RALPH

You stand here, see him crush me——

BLANCHE

And admire him for having the courage to do a cowardly thing!

RALPH

(*Wild with fury*)

He offered me—do you know what he offered? He was to give me money—set me up in business—and in

six months—when I would be a success—you were to choose between us!

BLANCHE

You did that, Geoffrey?

RALPH

(Giving him no chance to answer)

No, he didn't! He was leading me on, that was all! Joking! Just *joking!*

BLANCHE

But you—you would have been willing to wait six months?

RALPH

Willing? Delighted!

BLANCHE

You would have come to me——

RALPH

And let you choose between us!

BLANCHE

Yes. But I have made that choice. Don't you think I know my mind *now?* How many seconds did you think it took me to find out which was the finer man: you or Geoffrey? If he had been serious in his offer, do you know what I would have said? I would

have said, " You feel there is truth in what he says: that your money attracts me. So you propose to make him a rich man also. What a monstrous insult to me! "

RALPH

Insult?

BLANCHE

The man who marries me will want me so badly that six *days* will be too long to wait for my answer! He won't ask whether I marry him for his money or his position: he won't care *why* I marry him: so long as I *marry* him!

RALPH

But it would have been a fine thing to do! It would have been a magnificent thing to do! It would have been a gentlemanly thing to do!

BLANCHE

For someone else, perhaps: not for me! Fine? Magnificent? Gentlemanly? I don't want to be loved—gently. I don't want to be won—fairly! I don't want to think that my husband cared for me so little that he gave all the others an equal chance! That he won me, perhaps, only because someone else was still more polite! (*She shakes her head.*) I would have said, "*Gentlemen*, in six months you will have concluded a very entertaining experiment. But don't come around to see *me* when it's over. *I'm* not interested!"

BELDEN

(*Moved*)

Thank you—thank you, Blanche.

RALPH

(*Dazed—gasping*)

And you—you have the reputation of being a just man!

BELDEN

(*Nodding*)

I cultivate it. (*He smiles kindly.*) Don't you see, *you're* not going to tell people what a rotter I am.

RALPH

Not tell them? That's just what I'm going to do!

BELDEN

And make a fool of yourself?

BLANCHE

(*Taking BELDEN'S arm*)

Don't worry, Geoffrey. He has done that already.

(*She turns to RALPH with an imperious gesture of dismissal. He hesitates. She smiles, then breaks into a laugh, a mocking, merciless laugh. He flushes, turns slowly, leaves the room. There is a pause. Then:*)

BLANCHE

Are you really going to discharge him?

BELDEN

(Smiling)

What do *you* say, dear?

BLANCHE

(Thinks an instant. Then a steely glint comes into her eyes, and she nods)

A man with so much sentiment would never be a success in business anyhow. Come, Geoffrey.

(They go. The droning of the orchestra continues—and the murmur of conversation—and the shuffle of dancing slippers. . . .)

THE CURTAIN FALLS



ACCORDING TO DARWIN
A PLAY IN TWO SCENES

FOREWORD

THE author sincerely trusts that no reader will construe any part of what follows in the light of an attack upon one of the greatest boons of modern civilization—organized charity.

But if the reader has occasionally reflected that no force is more capable of doing damage than that power of affecting the course of human life which is sometimes placed in the hands of inexpert administrators, then the author will exclaim with him, "Charity! What sins are committed in thy name!"

CHARACTERS

BETTY.

TOM.

WILLIE.

A CHARITY WORKER.

A SHERIFF.

THE FIRST SCENE

THE SCENE

*Is laid at BETTY'S, in a cheap tenement, in the slums
of New York.*

THE TIME

An evening in Summer.

ACCORDING TO DARWIN

THE FIRST SCENE

I*F rooms bespeak character, this room, the scene upon which the curtain rises, is eloquent. For it tells the tale of a struggle with poverty—a struggle against the most overwhelming odds. There is no carpet, but the floor is tolerably clean. The wall-paper, left by some more prosperous tenant, hangs in shreds, but the worst places are concealed by gaudily colored pictures. There is a stove, and a dish of something is simmering on it. A few rickety chairs, no two alike, are about the room. And against a wall, a nondescript arrangement of wooden boxes, old rags, newspapers, and scraps of colored cloth, might pass for a couch. There is a window: of course there is a window: the tenement law requires it. But the fire-escape outside is encumbered with drying laundry, and the window is as useless for ventilation as it is for light.*

A lifeless room. A cheerless room. An unspeakably dismal room. Yet it is the show-room of the "apartment," for, by the evidence of the couch, only one of the tenants can sleep here, and a wobbly door, from

which the varnish is peeling in long strips, leads into a "bedroom." A bedroom, indeed, it must be, though we make no careful investigation. A glimpse through the doorway reveals a decrepit mattress and a lumpy pillow, and, once again, the inspectors would be pleased to observe a diminutive hole in the wall, opening on a lightless shaft: a "window."

As the curtain rises, BETTY, a rather attractive girl of nineteen, is removing the dishes from the table at which she and her younger brother TOM have just eaten. The fairest flowers are said to bloom in filth, and there is a purity, a delicacy of outline about BETTY'S profile, which is curiously pleasing. There are hard lines about the mouth, and the beginning of a nasty contraction at the side of the eyelids, but these are not pleasing. One had better not look at them. Misery, and hopelessness: of course they are in her face, but she is a pretty girl, if you take but a fleeting glance at her. Let it go at that.

TOM, the younger brother, who sells newspapers, and does odd jobs, is a depressingly sophisticated lad of eighteen. At this age a boy is supposed to be "full of life"; is expected to be "bubbling over with spirits." Perhaps that is what TOM is thinking of as he sits in his chair and stares—stares through grime and filth, and brick and stone, into something far beyond.

From some not distant church a clock strikes. BETTY listens:

BETTY

What time was that?

TOM

Seven.

BETTY

Light the gas, Tom, will you? (*He rises, scratches a match, and touches it to a jet in the center of the room. BETTY takes a purse from a place of concealment.*) To-morrow's the first of the month, Tom.

TOM

(*Slowly*)

Yes.

BETTY

I've got the rent this time.

TOM

Yes?

BETTY

(*Counting out the money*)

There. And almost a dollar over. Just think what that means! You're making almost four dollars a week, and I made over eleven last week!

TOM

(*In the same slow, measured tone*)

Yes.

BETTY

Fifteen dollars a week between us! Tom, we'll be able to put something by! I'm going to open an account in a savings bank.

TOM

(As before)

Yes.

BETTY

(Putting her arms about his shoulders)

We've slaved for it, haven't we? It used to be mighty hard, old fellow.

TOM

Yes. When Willie was with us.

BETTY

(Nodding)

It made such a difference. The two of us, to support him, with all the things he had to have. The medicines—and the food——

TOM

And one of us had to stay home part of the day.

BETTY

Well, he couldn't do much for himself, could he?

TOM

It's hard to make a living when you've got only half your time to do it in.

BETTY

Tom, we oughtn't complain. We *had* to do it. If you were taken sick, I'd look out for you, wouldn't I? It would be the least I could do. (*He shrugs his shoulders.*) Well, Willie's our brother.

TOM

What did Willie ever do for us when he was well? (*BETTY does not answer.*) He made more money than both of us put together, but *we* never saw any of it! We could go to the dogs for all he cared!

BETTY

(*Reproachfully*)

Tom!

TOM

(*Dispassionately*)

I'm not saying this because I'm angry. I'm simply telling you what happened. Willie made the money, and Willie spent the money. He liked to amuse himself. There was nothing to stop him. You needed shoes, but Willie needed a drink. So Willie got the drink, and you—you could have gone barefoot for all the difference it made to him.

BETTY

Tom, he was punished.

TOM

He punished? Not much! Do you call it punishment that he fell off a ladder when he was drunk? No,

we were punished! *We!* It wasn't hard enough to look out for ourselves: we had to look out for him too . . .

(He breaks off.)

BETTY

Tom: Willie's a cripple. The doctors say he won't live six months. Don't you think you might forgive him?

TOM

Forgiving him is easy. What's done is done. But that's not the point. Willie's coming home.

BETTY

(Thunderstruck)

Coming home? But I thought the Society was taking care of him.

TOM

Yes.

BETTY

Then why——?

TOM

I stopped in this afternoon. You know, they said I was to see Willie once a week.

BETTY

(Impatiently)

Well?

TOM

They've cured him.

BETTY

Cured him? Then he'll be able to work!

TOM

(Shaking his head slowly)

No.

BETTY

What do you mean?

TOM

It's very simple. He was a cripple. He was going to die in six months. But they were charitable. They sent him to the hospital. They operated him.

BETTY

(Breathlessly)

And what happened?

TOM

The operation was a success. *(He pauses.)* He'll live, do you understand? He's got as many years in

him as you or I, but he's paralyzed—that's all: just paralyzed.

BETTY

(*Slowly*)

Then he's no better.

TOM

Oh, yes! He's lots better! We thought he was going to die. The doctors thought he was going to die. But they operated. It was a wonderful operation. The lady in charge at the Society told me how wonderful it was: the doctors are going to write a book about it. So—Willie's *not* going to die. He's coming back here to live with us.

BETTY

(*Aghast*)

But *we* can't take care of him!

TOM

The hospital can't. They've got other sick people.

BETTY

Willie's sick!

TOM

(*Shaking his head*)

He's as well as he'll ever be. He doesn't need the

hospital. Only medicines, and good food, and somebody to wheel him around, and he'll live to be seventy.

BETTY

(Staggering under the succession of blows)

Somebody to wheel him around?

TOM

The ladies at the Society took up a collection and bought him a wheel chair. I saw it. Rubber tires, and silk cushions, and real mahogany. He's got to be in the fresh air for two hours every day.

BETTY

How will we get him up and down stairs?

TOM

(Does not answer. When he speaks again it is in the same dead voice)

If it had been a year sooner, they couldn't have saved him. It's a new operation. The lady at the Society said we ought to be very thankful. He might have died *(with a sudden flash of anger)*, but they wouldn't let him!

BETTY

But why do they send him here? Why doesn't the Society take care of him? That's what they're for. They can take care of him so much better!

TOM

They've been taking care of him for some time now.

BETTY

What of that?

TOM

(*Wearily*)

Don't you understand? They don't believe in breaking up the family. (BETTY *does not answer.*) Willie has a home to go to. (*He waves his hand grimly.*) *This* is the home. So they're sending him here. (*He pauses again.*) The lady at the Society explained it all to me. Too much charity would make paupers out of us, and they don't want that to happen. They've done all they think they should for Willie. It's up to us now.

BETTY

(*Desperately*)

Tom: if Willie comes here you know what it will mean. We're *just* managing to live—we're *just* managing to get along——

TOM

(*Bitterly*)

The Society doesn't want to break up the home. It's our privilege to look out for Willie: "privilege": that was the word she used. The Society helped us over

a hard place, but if they helped us any more it would be bad for us. They're afraid it would make us less independent. . . . Well, Willie'll be here any minute.

BETTY

(Taking his hands, almost weeping)

Tom! Tom!

TOM

You know, we rich people—a few dollars more or less don't matter. And we can't pitch him out into the street, can we? He's our brother.

BETTY

Tom, what's to become of us?

TOM

Betty: nobody cares. We don't matter. *(There is a sound of voices outside.)* They're bringing him up.

(A rap at the door. BETTY opens it.)

THE CHARITY WORKER

(Enters. She is a thin, kind-faced woman of middle age, rather winded from the steep ascent)

Is this—is this——?

TOM

(Recognizing her)

Yes. This is the place, Mrs. Todd.

THE CHARITY WORKER

(With a sigh of relief)

It wasn't easy bringing him up those stairs.

(Two men, one in front, one behind, lift WILLIE, chair and all, over the threshold, and wheel him into the room. WILLIE is a large-framed man of twenty-three, whose head rolls from side to side as the chair moves. The lower part of his body is snugly wrapped in a blanket.)

BETTY

(Neither joy nor love nor surprise in her voice. Simply recognition of a fact)

Willie!

WILLIE

(Speaking in the uncertain voice of a paralytic—a voice which has been seriously affected by his ailment)

How—how do you do?

THE CHARITY WORKER

(Smoothing WILLIE's hair, and putting on a few finishing touches as if he were an entry in a dog-show)

He looks well, doesn't he? Splendid color! Well, I'm going to leave you here, Willie.

WILLIE

Y—yes, Mrs. Todd.

THE CHARITY WORKER

You'll have your brother and sister to take care of you. You'll like that better than the hospital, won't you?

WILLIE

Y—yes, Mrs. Todd.

THE CHARITY WORKER

(*Turning enthusiastically to TOM*)

It's wonderful what science can do now-a-days! When he came to us—you know what he was like.

TOM

Yes.

THE CHARITY WORKER

And now! Look at him! Would anybody think that the doctors actually gave him up? Tom, (*she lays her hand on his shoulder*) you ought to be very grateful! We've saved him for you! Saved him!

BETTY

(*Rising to the situation*)

I'm sure we're very thankful, Mrs. Todd.

THE CHARITY WORKER

(*Pleased*)

Of course. Of course. But the Society doesn't want thanks. We're just glad that we've helped you. And I'm sure you'll take good care of him.

BETTY

(Slowly)

Yes.

THE CHARITY WORKER

Two hours of fresh air every day—your brother can help you carry him downstairs—and milk, and plenty of food. That's all. And his medicine three times a day. *(She takes the bottle from WILLIE'S breast pocket, and shows it to her.)* It's all written on the bottle.

BETTY

(Taking the bottle)

Yes, Mrs. Todd.

THE CHARITY WORKER

He won't be much trouble. *(From the chair comes a gasping gurgle—WILLIE'S laugh.)* You see how cheerful he is? He has a magnificent constitution, haven't you, Willie?

WILLIE

Y—yes, Mrs. Todd.

THE CHARITY WORKER

(Drawing BETTY aside)

The doctors never expected him to pull through: they were surprised when he came out of the ether! *(She smiles confidentially.)* You ought to be proud of

him: he's quite a celebrity in his way. (*She turns back to WILLIE.*) Well, I must be going, but I'm leaving you in good hands. Good-by, Willie.

WILLIE

G—good-by, Mrs. Todd.

TOM

(*Drawing the CHARITY WORKER to one side as she is about to leave*)

Mrs. Todd!

THE CHARITY WORKER

(*With a pleasant smile*)

Yes?

TOM

(*Almost desperately*)

Don't you think the Society could take better care of him than we could?

THE CHARITY WORKER

(*Her smiles freezing on her lips*)

I've explained that to you once.

TOM

(*Resolutely*)

But that's what the Society's for, isn't it?

THE CHARITY WORKER
(*Standing on her dignity*)

The ladies who founded the Society are quite competent to manage it. (*He is so crushed that she continues more kindly.*) Tom, this isn't the only case of the kind we've handled. We've had a hundred like it! And we're doing for you what our experience has taught us is best.

TOM

But if it doesn't work?

THE CHARITY WORKER
(*Confidently*)

It will. (*She radiates a liberally inclusive smile upon the reunited family.*) Good-by. (*She goes.*)
(*There is a pause. The others, who have overheard nothing of the conversation, have, nevertheless, maintained a respectful silence. Now WILLIE turns to his sister.*)

WILLIE

W—well, sis! G—glad to see me?

BETTY

Of course, Willie.

WILLIE

I—I'm a triumph of surgery. That—that's what the doctors said. Took me all apart, and put me together again, and here I am, alive and kicking! N—no, not kicking, but alive! You bet I'm alive!

BETTY

Don't talk if it tires you, Willie.

WILLIE

N—no. It doesn't tire me. I—I did a lot of talking in the hospital. And reading! I did a lot of reading. You—you see (*he jerks his head a little to one side*) there's a thing on the chair to hold a book. You put it in front of me, and you turn the pages.

BETTY

You can't use your hands, Willie? You used to.

WILLIE

They're not much good to me now. But I can talk, I can! I—I'm a gay old bird! (*BETTY and TOM stare at each other in expressive silence.*) Eighteen men operated, and I'm the only one who wasn't killed by it! Survival of the fittest, eh? (*He laughs his gurgling laugh.*) I learnt that from a book at the hospital. The weakest go to the wall! (*He laughs again. Then, suddenly:*) Tom!

TOM

Yes, Willie?

WILLIE

B—bet you a dollar I live longer than you do!

THE CURTAIN FALLS

THE SECOND SCENE

THE SCENE

Is the same as before.

THE TIME

Two months later—an October morning.

THE SECOND SCENE

ONCE more the room speaks for itself. Some of the pictures still remain on the wall, but they no longer hang straight, and do not conceal the rents in the wall-paper. A highly colored picture of St. Francis throwing food to the birds, a picture which lent something of dignity to the first scene, is all askew, and the saint seems to have acquired an odd rakishness of expression. The window and the floor are dirty, and litter of all kinds has accumulated.

On the couch sits BETTY, tired, sleepy, her head between her hands. It is little we can see of her as she huddles up, in a vain effort, as it were, to hide herself from the world, but the glance which once appraised her claims to beauty cannot avoid the cheaply gaudy dress, the bedraggled plumes of her hat, the cracked patent-leather shoes, the sheer silk stockings, and, as she moves, the rouge and lip-salve which are so liberally applied to the pinched features. Her hand trembles, and the imitation jewelry with which it is laden glitters. She is pathetic—indescribably pathetic, and she alone, in all the world, cannot appreciate it. For her intelligence, never of the greatest, is quite unable to cope with the situation. That WILLIE, who, like

some heathen idol, sits motionless in the center of the room, has had something to do with her downfall, she recognizes—but recognizes dimly. The whole catastrophe is too overwhelming, too devastating, and, with it, has come a blessed numbness, a hazy indifference, under whose kindly anæsthesia the poor thread of her life writhes on.

WILLIE, *motionless, sits in his chair, and the smoke which curls from a cigarette in his mouth lends a curious emphasis to the continual play of his twitching features. From outside, through the unwashed window, comes a brilliant beam of sunlight, a beam hot, and quivering with life. And it falls upon the meager furnishings of the room and makes them stand forth but more sharply in their gaunt nakedness.*

WILLIE

Tom! (*There is no answer.*) Tom!

BETTY

(*Raising her head listlessly*)

What do you want?

WILLIE

I—I want Tom to take the cigarette out of my mouth.

BETTY

(*Relapsing into her stupor*)

He's asleep.

WILLIE

W—well, I want him! What business has he got to go to sleep now? Tom! Tom!

TOM

(Appearing at the bedroom door)

I heard you the first time. *(He enters. He is fully dressed, and carries a small bundle.)* There you are.

(He snatches the cigarette out of WILLIE'S mouth.)

WILLIE

D—don't have to be so rough about it! *(He pauses.)* D—do you hear me? Don't have to be so rough about it!

TOM

(Crossing gently to BETTY)

Betty! *(He touches her arm.)* Wake up, Betty!

BETTY

What is it?

TOM

The sheriff will be here any minute now.

WILLIE

(Catching the word)

Eh? Sheriff?

TOM

(Disregarding him)

Betty! *(She has sunken into her stupor again.)*
Listen to me, Betty! I'm not going to wait for him.

BETTY

Eh?

TOM

I'm going away. Do you understand that, Betty?

BETTY

What?

TOM

I'm going away—far away. Outside of New York.

BETTY

(Beginning to realize)

You're not going to leave me, Tom?

TOM

(Resolutely)

Yes.

BETTY

(Fully wide awake)

Tom! You don't mean it! You don't mean that you're going for good and all?

TOM

Yes, Betty.

BETTY

(*Aghast*)

Tom! (*With terrible suspicion.*) You're going because——!

(*A vaguely inclusive gesture to her tawdry finery.*)

TOM

(*Earnestly*)

No—that's not why. I don't blame you. Understand that, Betty, I don't blame you.

BETTY

Then why——?

TOM

Betty, *you've* got nothing to do with it! I'm going away because I want a chance for *myself*! I'm young! I've got my life before me! And I'm going to make the most of it!

(WILLIE, *in his chair, laughs harshly.*)

BETTY

But why don't you stay here?

TOM

Here?

(*A torrent of words rises to his lips, but he sees how futile any explanation must be.*)

BETTY

(Desperately)

If you go away, Tom, what will become of *me*?

TOM

I don't know.

BETTY

Take me with you!

TOM

(Shaking his head)

No. You'll hamper me. *(She recoils as if struck by a whip-lash. He takes her hands.)* Betty: two months ago we had a chance, you and I! But you, you're done for! And I, by God, I'm not!

BETTY

Tom!

TOM

(Vehemently)

You loved him—and see what's become of you! You're finished! You're down and out! You can't help me: you can only hurt me!

BETTY

Tom: don't you love me?

TOM

Yes! But we've got no chance together! It's each for himself, Betty! Good-by! (*She falls on his neck, weeping. Slowly and deliberately he disengages her arms, and with a sudden tenderness, presses a kiss to the painted lips.*) Good-by! (*He turns, and his glance falls upon the motionless cripple, living eyes, living mouth, living brain, mocking him in a dead body. He nods grimly.*) Willie!

WILLIE

(*Terrified as TOM draws near*)

W—what is it?

TOM

(*With a short laugh*)

Oh, I'm not going to hurt you! But I want you to deliver a message to Mrs. Todd. (*He pauses.*) Tell her, Willie, tell Mrs. Todd, it *didn't* work.

(*He goes.*)

WILLIE

(*Rather relieved at the sound of his departing footsteps*)

Survival of the fittest! Eh, Betty? Weakest go to the wall! (*He laughs.*) S—survival of the fittest! (*Huddled on the couch, BETTY weeps loudly.*) Betty! Eh, Betty!

BETTY

What?

WILLIE

Sheriff coming?

BETTY

Yes.

WILLIE

Being evicted, eh?

BETTY

Yes. (*She wipes her eyes and blows her nose.*)
I stopped in at the Society.

WILLIE

Yes?

BETTY

They're going to send for you.

WILLIE

Of course. (*He grins.*) Couldn't pitch *me* into the street, could they? *G—got* to take care of me, eh? (*She does not answer.*) Betty, they call that survival of the fittest! *I'm* fit!

(*Through the open door enter THE CHARITY WORKER and THE SHERIFF, a tall, burly individual.*)

THE SHERIFF

(*Leading the way*)

This is the place, Mrs. Todd.

THE CHARITY WORKER

I'm sure it's not. (*She catches sight of WILLIE.*)
Yes, it is. (*Going up to WILLIE, much moved.*) Ah,
my poor fellow!

WILLIE

H—hello, Mrs. Todd.

THE CHARITY WORKER

(*Brushing dust from WILLIE's coat*)

What a state you're in! They haven't taken good
care of you, have they?

WILLIE

N—not very, Mrs. Todd.

THE CHARITY WORKER

It's an outrage! Nothing more nor less! (*BETTY
has risen, and faces her.*) You heard what I said?
It's an outrage! A poor, helpless cripple—the way
you've taken care of him! (*BETTY, rather confused,
does not move.* THE CHARITY WORKER *notices her
attire, and suddenly takes in its significance.*) Good
Heavens! So you're *that* kind! *You!* Why didn't
you tell me that, Willie? If I'd known, I would
never have let you come here! Never! (*Genuinely
affected.*) To think where I sent you!

(*BETTY laughs loudly and hysterically.*)

THE CHARITY WORKER

(*Indignant*)

You're *laughing* at me? (*Appealingly.*) Sheriff!

THE SHERIFF

Don't mind her, Mrs. Todd.

THE CHARITY WORKER

But she's laughing!

THE SHERIFF

(*Consolingly*)

They've got no feelings, those people! Bite the hand that feeds them! They're just animals!

BETTY

(*Taking up the word*)

Animals? An animal? Yes! That's what you've *made* me! But I wasn't an animal till *he* came here!

THE CHARITY WORKER

What do you mean?

BETTY

It was hard enough to get along—only the two of us, Tom and me. And then *he* came along, *he*, just a mouth to be fed, and hands that couldn't work, and we didn't have the money, and we couldn't get the money. So—well, that's why I'm *that* kind! Because I couldn't keep him alive any other way!

THE CHARITY WORKER

(Taken aback)

Sheriff: is this true?

THE SHERIFF

(Shaking his head with an easy superiority)

Not a word of it.

BETTY

What?!

THE SHERIFF

(With a contemptuous wave of the hand)

She? She's no good anyhow!

BETTY

(Indignantly)

That's not so!

THE SHERIFF

Not so? You think I haven't seen you hanging around the dance halls and the saloons——

BETTY

(Interrupting furiously)

You didn't see me there until *he* came!

THE SHERIFF

(Mildly amused)

What?

BETTY

I was a good girl just as long as I could be! But when we had to take care of him, the money wasn't enough, and there was nothing else I *could* do!

THE SHERIFF

(With finality)

That's what they all say! There's nothing else any of 'em could do! *(He seizes her roughly by the shoulders.)* Listen to me, my girl! You're rotten! You're naturally rotten! I'd tell you to give it up, but I know your kind! You won't! It isn't in you! You're no good—you're headed wrong—and you know where you're going to finish! *(He flings her aside, and turns to THE CHARITY WORKER, with a gesture to WILLIE.)* Can he walk?

THE CHARITY WORKER

Oh, no!

THE SHERIFF

I'll have the men carry him downstairs.

BETTY

(Near the door, would like to speak, but she is a little deficient in education. And after all, she has said what she has to say. What remains to be said is beyond her—and above her. And then THE SHERIFF and THE CHARITY WORKER are so manifestly hostile. THE SHERIFF turns and sees her.)

THE SHERIFF

(Advancing on BETTY)

Can't waste any more time on you! Out you go!

WILLIE

(Contributing his first word to a scene of which he has been an interested spectator)

S—survival of the fittest, eh, Sheriff?

BETTY

(Retreating before the menacing embodiment of the law, pauses at the threshold. So many feelings vaguely surge within her. But she is not an adept at choosing words. This room has seen her tragedy. This she faintly comprehends, but cannot find the language to voice illimitable protest. And with that instinctive desire to make a dramatic exit which lies deep in every one of us, she gathers herself up in her pitiable finery.)

Sheriff!

THE SHERIFF

(Bumping her brutally through the door)

Git!

(He follows her.)

(A pause.)

THE CHARITY WORKER

(Turns to WILLIE, and at his sight—not at the thought of what has just taken place, wipes a tear from her eye.)

It's been pretty bad, hasn't it, Willie?

WILLIE

(In whose self-centered brain may lurk a better understanding of the situation)

Y—yes, Mrs. Todd.

THE CHARITY WORKER

What you must have gone through! *(She shakes her head in pity. Then, with a rather cheerful smile:)*
Well, Willie, have you any *other* relatives?

THE CURTAIN FALLS

A QUESTION OF MORALITY
A COMEDY

CHARACTERS

SHELTON.

CARRUTHERS.

DOROTHY SHELTON.

A BUTLER.

THE SCENE

At Shelton's.

A QUESTION OF MORALITY

AS the curtain rises, SHELTON and CARRUTHERS are discovered. SHELTON, a not unattractive social butterfly of some thirty-five years of age, has inherited wealth, and having never had to concern himself with productive labor, has acquired a fine dilettantism: an ability to do many things badly, without doing any one of them so badly that it becomes evident he has neglected it. CARRUTHERS, his friend, has even less claim to distinction. They would pass in a crowd—if the crowd were large enough, but no one, with the possible exception of a Society Editor, would give either of them a second glance. Were one to seek something visibly commendable about them, one might remark that they are groomed and tailored to an exquisite nicety—too exquisite, perhaps. They are in full dress, for they have just finished the evening meal, and as the assiduous butler lights their cigars, places the liqueur tray on the table, and discreetly effaces himself, they slowly push their chairs into more comfortable positions, and look at each other. There is something in that look: something unusual, and the shadow of a smile curls about the husband's lips as he raises his arm to consult a wrist-watch.

CARRUTHERS

What time?

SHELTON

Twelve minutes of eight—no, ten minutes of. My watch is a little slow.

CARRUTHERS

(Rather brilliantly, after a pause)

Thought it was later than that.

SHELTON

(Having weighed the pros and cons carefully)

So did I.

CARRUTHERS

(After another pause)

Thought it was at least quarter past.

SHELTON

So did I. *(Consulting the watch again.)* It's eleven minutes of—that is to say, nine minutes of, now. *(He pauses and smiles reflectively.)* Jerry!

CARRUTHERS

Yes?

SHELTON

I wonder what Cheever's saying to her now?

CARRUTHERS

I wonder?

SHELTON

(Examining a time-table)

Their train pulls out at eight.

CARRUTHERS

(With a trace of animation)

I thought you said they were leaving this afternoon.

SHELTON

Eh?

CARRUTHERS

The six o'clock train, you said first.

SHELTON

Oh, yes. But she had to do some shopping. You can't get any decent clothes in Chicago, you know. *(He chuckles slowly.)* I suppose she wanted the satisfaction of charging a final bill to me, eh, Jerry?

CARRUTHERS

(Nodding sympathetically)

It's cost you a pretty penny, all in all.

SHELTON

(Philosophically)

Well, your wife doesn't elope with some other chap every day, does she?

CARRUTHERS

(Undecidedly)

Er, no.

SHELTON

This is a special occasion. If Dorothy feels she has a right to *carte blanche* on her last day as my wife, I don't know but what I ought to agree with her. It's sentimental, you know.

CARRUTHERS

But expensive.

SHELTON

Sentiment is always expensive. At any rate, I'm footing the bills. A little more or less doesn't matter. *(He rises, and produces a mass of papers from a convenient desk.)* Just look at these.

CARRUTHERS

What are they?

SHELTON

The detectives' reports. *(He thumbs them over with a smile.)* It's been like a continued-in-our-next story. I've been reading them for the last month.

CARRUTHERS

(Surprised)

I didn't know you had detectives following her.

SHELTON
(*Confused*)

Er, yes.

CARRUTHERS
Do you think that's cricket?

SHELTON
(*Hesitantly*)

Well, I couldn't *ask* her if she was going to run away.

CARRUTHERS
Why not?

SHELTON
She's too good a woman to lie to me—and I didn't want to embarrass her. (CARRUTHERS *smiles cynically*. SHELTON *crushes him politely*.) You wouldn't understand such things anyhow, Jerry. (*He bundles the reports together again*.) The last installment reached me to-day. It took her a month to make up her mind. Cheever wanted her to elope long ago, but she wouldn't hear of it. She had scruples. And to-morrow!

CARRUTHERS
(*Thinking he is rising to the situation*)
To-morrow's another day.

SHELTON

(With a faint frown)

No. To-morrow I'll be a free man—no wife, no responsibilities, no conscience. Rather clever of me, eh, Jerry? If I had told her I didn't mind, she never would have run off. Never!

CARRUTHERS

She's a moral woman, your wife.

SHELTON

(Nodding emphatically)

Well, rather! *(Confidentially.)* Do you know, I'm not sure that she isn't running off with Cheever because she wants to reform him? He's a bad lot, you know; gambles, and drinks, and a devil with the ladies.

CARRUTHERS

(Slowly)

I'm not knocking anybody, but you used to travel around with him.

SHELTON

(Not at all disturbed)

Yes: when I was single. Oh, I'm not making any bones about it: I was as bad as he—worse. *(With satisfaction.)* Much worse. Cheever and I, well, we had reps! You know what they were like.

CARRUTHERS

I do.

SHELTON

(Solemnly)

But that's all over with now. I'm a better man since I married Dorothy. She's reformed me. There was lots to reform, too. I was a bad 'un. But that didn't bother her: she enjoyed it. She used to talk to me, just like a mother, Jerry, and she got me to cut out cards, and the ponies—*(he pauses reflectively)*—I used to lose a bale of money on the races, Jerry. *(CARRUTHERS does not answer. He finishes emphatically.)* She's had an awfully good influence on me.

CARRUTHERS

(After a period of cogitation)

She's helped you?

SHELTON

(Enthusiastically)

Helped me? I can't begin to tell you how many ways——

CARRUTHERS

(Interrupting)

Then why are you letting her go?

SHELTON

(Taken aback)

Eh?

CARRUTHERS

Why are you letting her run off with Cheever?

SHELTON

(Nervously)

You don't keep on taking the medicine after you're cured, do you, Jerry? I'm cured, you know. And I don't want to be cured any more than I am. I'm a good man. I'm so good, Jerry, I'm so good sometimes, that I'm almost afraid of myself! *(He pauses, to continue candidly.)* It's so different—and so strange. Before I married Dorothy I wasn't good: that was when I went around with Cheever. But it was so comfortable: I was so sure of myself. I never had any regrets. I wasn't afraid to drink, because even if I—well, even if I *did* take a drop too much I wouldn't make a fool of myself: I'd act just as if I were sober. *(He emphasizes his point with a clenched fist.)* Jerry, I was *consistent* then! I was dependable. I never had anything to be ashamed of. Whatever I did, well, I stood back of it. I didn't have to worry. And now? I'm living on the brink of a volcano! I'm full of all kinds of impulses to do good things: things I don't want to do. I never know what's going to happen next, and Jerry, I don't like it! It's not fair to me. I'm like a man who has swallowed a

stick of dynamite: he's expecting it to blow up any minute, but if it ever does blow up, there won't be enough of him left to be surprised at it. (CARRUTHERS, *considerably beyond his depth, makes no reply.*) A man should be true to himself. I don't know whom I'm true to, but it's not Billy Shelton! There's no Billy Shelton left: he's nine-tenths Dorothy, and one-tenth remnants!

CARRUTHERS

(*Shifting uneasily*)

Isn't it time to go to a show?

SHELTON

(*Consulting his watch*)

Eight o'clock. That is, two minutes after. Jerry, she's gone!

CARRUTHERS

All right. Let's get our coats on.

(*He rises.*)

SHELTON

No. Wait a minute.

CARRUTHERS

(*Glancing at him curiously*)

What's the matter with you?

SHELTON

It's too sudden. I can't realize it yet.

CARRUTHERS

You've been expecting it a month.

SHELTON

Yes.

CARRUTHERS

Waiting for it—counting the hours.

SHELTON

Yes. (*He throws his cigar away nervously.*) Jerry, it's two years since I've been to a show without Dorothy.

CARRUTHERS

Well?

SHELTON

What are you going to do afterwards?

CARRUTHERS

Anything you like.

SHELTON

For instance?

CARRUTHERS

Stop in somewheres for a bite. Look in at the Club: there's always a game of stud.

SHELTON

(Nodding thoughtfully)

I used to lose a lot of money at that, Jerry. *(He looks at him appealingly.)* Jerry.

CARRUTHERS

Well?

SHELTON

Would you mind—if I stayed home to-night?

CARRUTHERS

(Surprised)

What?

SHELTON

I mean it. I don't feel like going out so soon after——

CARRUTHERS

It's not a funeral, you know.

SHELTON

No. But——

CARRUTHERS

But what?

SHELTON

Dorothy wouldn't like it.

CARRUTHERS

Good Lord!

SHELTON

(Nodding seriously)

I mean it. Anyhow, you want to see some musical comedy, don't you?

CARRUTHERS

Why not?

SHELTON

It would bore me to death. *(Rather shamefacedly.)*
I used to care for that sort of thing, but Dorothy taught me to enjoy the opera.

CARRUTHERS

(Facing him resolutely)

Answer me one question.

SHELTON

Well?

CARRUTHERS

Is Dorothy your wife, or *was* she your wife?

SHELTON

(Hesitantly)

I guess it's "is." You see, she's not more than ten miles away from New York now.

CARRUTHERS

And you're afraid you may have to account to her?

SHELTON

No. It's not that. She's left me, and I'm my own master. But the very day that she elopes, don't you think it would be a little (*he searches for a word*)—a little indecent if I were to start celebrating? I'm a gentleman, Jerry, and it wouldn't be quite respectful to Dorothy. She mightn't like it. (*He lights on a happy simile.*) It's like reading the will while the corpse is still warm, isn't it? Come now, be honest, Jerry.

CARRUTHERS

(With warmth)

Well, I'm thirty-three, and I'm a bachelor.

SHELTON

What's the point?

CARRUTHERS

I say if that's married life, I don't want to get married!

(The door opens, and DOROTHY, a tall, slim, rather attractive woman in her late twenties, stands on the threshold. She is quite excited, and she trembles a little. The men, thunderstruck at her sudden appear-

ance, are unable to voice a greeting. SHELTON, collapsed in his chair, gasps like a fish out of water, and CARRUTHERS, petrified at the height of an oratorical gesture, is not much better.)

SHELTON

(At length)

Good evening, Dorothy. (DOROTHY leaves the doorway, and staggers to a chair. SHELTON, alarmed, hastens to her.) Get some water, Jerry.

DOROTHY

No, no. I want nothing.

(CARRUTHERS, carafe in hand, stands motionless. SHELTON indicates the door. CARRUTHERS nods, and goes.)

DOROTHY

Is he gone?

SHELTON

Yes. *(Genuinely anxious.)* Is anything wrong with you, Dorothy?

DOROTHY

No. . . . *(She pauses.)* Billy.

SHELTON

Yes?

DOROTHY

I've come back. I've come home again.

SHELTON

(Lamely)

Yes. So I notice.

DOROTHY

You got my note?

SHELTON

Your note? What note?

DOROTHY

I sent it with a messenger half an hour ago.

SHELTON

I haven't seen it.

DOROTHY

No? *(She passes her hand over her forehead wearily.)* Billy, it was a farewell.

SHELTON

(With an affectation of surprise)

What?

DOROTHY

I was on the point of leaving you: of running off with another man.

SHELTON

With Cheever?

DOROTHY

You suspected? (SHELTON *nods*. *She goes towards him with outstretched hands.*) Billy, at the last minute something stopped me. Something made me come home to you.

(For an instant SHELTON is silent. Then comes the amazing question:)

SHELTON

Why?

DOROTHY

(Staggered)

What?

SHELTON

(Insistently)

You were on the point of running away. You had planned everything carefully: people don't do such things on the spur of the moment. What stopped you?

DOROTHY

(Gasping at the shock)

Don't you love me?

SHELTON

(Not answering the question)

Cheever is a rich man. Of course, he hasn't got as much as I've got, but he has plenty to take care of you. The scandal you must have been prepared for. If you loved Cheever, what made you come back to me?

DOROTHY

You don't love me, Billy?

SHELTON

Would *that* have stopped you?

DOROTHY

Would that have——? *(She stops, thunderstruck at what she sees within herself.)* I don't know! *(Breaking down and weeping.)* I don't know, Billy! *(There is a pause. Then she gathers herself together.)* Billy, look at me!

SHELTON

Well?

DOROTHY

Am I a good woman?

SHELTON

(Hesitantly)

Well——

DOROTHY

Tell me the truth, Billy.

SHELTON

You *were* a good woman when you married me.

DOROTHY

(Excitedly)

Yes! That's right! I was a good woman *then*.
But am I a good woman *now*? *(He hesitates.)*
Answer me! Tell me!

SHELTON

(After a pause)

I don't know, Dorothy.

DOROTHY

(Desperately)

Billy, neither do I! *(There is a pause.)* No girl was ever brought up as I was. We were good: *so* good! All the people I met were so good! I don't believe any of them ever had a normal impulse. They were saints, Billy, saints! Then you were introduced to me—you remember?

SHELTON

Yes.

DOROTHY

I thought you were the worst man I had ever met.
(SHELTON is a little upset, but DOROTHY proceeds

fluently.) I had heard the most awful stories about you, oh, the most unbelievable things! You and Cheever!

SHELTON
(*Nodding*)

We were pals.

DOROTHY

Yes. I began to think. I knew that if I married a man as good as I was, I'd go mad: stark, staring mad! (*She pauses.*) Billy, have you ever felt an impulse to do something outrageous?

SHELTON

Of course.

DOROTHY

What happened?

SHELTON

I did it.

DOROTHY

So did I! For the first time in my life! I married you!

SHELTON
(*Offended*)

Thank you, Dorothy.

DOROTHY

Oh, I've had no regrets! It wasn't good for me, but I've enjoyed it! I've enjoyed it too much!

SHELTON

What do you mean?

DOROTHY

Billy, do you know you've had a great influence on me? (*He cannot answer.*) Do you imagine a woman can live with you for two years, as I have lived with you, and remain a perfectly good woman?

SHELTON

(*Floundering*)

Isn't that a little strong?

DOROTHY

The truth is always strong. I'm not blaming you, Billy. You've exerted an influence: it was the only influence you *could* exert.

SHELTON

(*Gasping*)

A bad one?

DOROTHY

The best that was in you.

SHELTON

Which is to say, the worst?

DOROTHY

I suppose so.

SHELTON

And Cheever?

DOROTHY

Another impulse. (*She pauses.*) Billy, I never knew until to-day how much bad there was in me. I didn't even know it when I began to go around with Cheever.

SHELTON

(*Bewildered*)

Do you call him a *good* impulse?

DOROTHY

I don't know. I didn't know whether it was the bad in him calling to the bad in me, or that which was capable of being reformed in him calling to the good in me! Which was it? There's bad in me, and there must be some good left in me. But what am I? A good woman or a bad woman? I don't know.

SHELTON

(*After a moment's reflection*)

You made me stop gambling.

DOROTHY

Yes.

SHELTON

And drinking.

DOROTHY

Yes.

SHELTON

Why?

DOROTHY

I wasn't trying to reform you.

SHELTON

No?

DOROTHY

That came to me to-day. I used to talk to you about your bad habits because, well, because I *liked* to talk about such things. I liked to hear you tell about them.

SHELTON

(After a pause)

Anyhow, I'm reformed.

DOROTHY

Yes.

SHELTON

What are you going to do about it?

DOROTHY

What *can* I do about it? I can't influence you any more: there isn't any *me* left. I look into myself, and I see oceans of Billy Shelton, nothing but Billy Shelton, as far as the eye can reach, and here and there, tossed by the waves, a little wreckage, such pathetic wreckage, that used to be something better! Billy, to-day I am what you have made me.

SHELTON

(*Thunderstruck*)

Which is to say that it was *I* who eloped with Cheever!

DOROTHY

That's what it amounts to.

SHELTON

Well then, what I want to know is, why didn't it go through?

DOROTHY

What do you mean?

SHELTON

If the me in you made you run off with Cheever, what brought you back?

DOROTHY

(*After a pause*)

Nothing brought me back.

SHELTON

No?

DOROTHY

Cheever *sent* me back. (*There is a long pause.*) We had arranged to meet at the station. I met him. We were to send our trunks ahead to Chicago. Mine left yesterday. I was ready to go through with it to the bitter end, but he——

SHELTON

He?

DOROTHY

He changed his mind at the last minute.

SHELTON

(*After deliberation*)

Why?

DOROTHY

That's what I've been asking myself.

SHELTON

Did he give any reason?

DOROTHY

He didn't have to. Am I a good woman or a bad woman? Cheever knows. I'm not what he thought I was. That's why he didn't elope with me. He found out at the last minute.

SHELTON

That you were a good woman?

DOROTHY

Perhaps.

SHELTON

Or that you were a bad one?

DOROTHY

I'd give anything to know. Cheever knows.

SHELTON

And he won't tell.

DOROTHY

No.

SHELTON

(After a thoughtful pause)

I like his nerve! (DOROTHY looks at him in mute inquiry.) My wife not good enough for him to elope with! (She does not answer.) Aren't you pretty enough? (She shrugs her shoulders.) Or clever enough? (He surveys her critically.) Is that something new you're wearing?

DOROTHY

Yes. I bought it to-day. Do you like it?

SHELTON

(Nodding his approval)

Yes. Looks well on you. *(There is a knock at the door.)* Come in.

THE BUTLER

(Entering with a letter on a salver)

Messenger just brought a note, sir.

DOROTHY

Oh!

SHELTON

(Glances at her. After an instant's hesitation, she nods her permission. He takes it, slowly opens the envelope, and reads the contents. THE BUTLER waits. SHELTON notices him.) Well, why are you waiting?

THE BUTLER

Is there an answer, sir?

SHELTON

An answer? No.

(THE BUTLER goes. In the ensuing silence SHELTON tears up the note.)

DOROTHY

My farewell? *(He nods.)* Well?

SHELTON

(*Slowly, as if stating a mathematical problem*)

Whatever you are, good or bad, doesn't matter. You've reformed me so thoroughly that you won't go far wrong in my company—and you're going to have lots of it.

DOROTHY

(*Submissively*)

Yes, Billy.

SHELTON

You may make slips: I *expect* you to make slips, but while I'm here to watch you they won't be bad ones.

DOROTHY

No, Billy.

SHELTON

And before I forget it: if you have any more outrageous impulses, they will be in *my* direction. You understand? (*She nods. He folds her comfortably in his arms, and smiles happily.*) From now on, I'm prepared to enjoy life.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

THE BEAUTIFUL STORY
A PLAY

“Here’s my case. Of old I used to love him. . . .”

CHARACTERS

THE FATHER.

THE MOTHER.

THE CHILD.

THE BEAUTIFUL STORY

IT is Christmas Eve. A cheerful fire is blazing in the old-fashioned hearth, and in its wavering light the contents of the room seem to be indulging in a grotesquely weird dance. Dignified chairs, well upholstered settees, and even the old-fashioned staircase at the rear flash into sight for an instant, and are swallowed up in shadows the next. And just beneath the staircase, where it curves towards the right to the lower landing, is the door of the dining-room, a door with leaded glass in its upper half, through which comes a dim but very steady illumination, a light in curious contrast to the alternate brilliance and eclipse of the crackling embers.

In the next room the family has just disposed of the evening meal. There is a clatter of dishes, a burst of laughter, and then, through the suddenly opened door, all three, father with the child on his shoulder, and mother sedately bringing up the rear, enter the living-room.

THE FATHER

(In the best of good spirits)

Well! This is something like! A good dinner, and my family round me, and Christmas Eve! Eh, Donald?

(He swings the child to the ground.)

THE CHILD

(Running to the mantel. He is a robust little fellow of twelve or thirteen)

Is my stocking there?

THE FATHER

Your stocking? *(Turning to the mother with mock seriousness.)* Where—where is Donald's stocking?

THE MOTHER

I'm going to give him one of mine. It's bigger.

THE CHILD

(Delighted)

Oh, mother!

THE MOTHER

And when it's full of things it'll stretch—it'll stretch ever so much. It won't look like a stocking at all! It'll look like a great big sausage!

THE CHILD

And all for me?

THE FATHER

Everything in it!

THE CHILD

Oh! *(He pauses.)* But Santa Claus might forget me.

THE FATHER

(Laughing)

He won't do that! *(Taking him on his knee.)*
You wrote him a letter, didn't you?

THE CHILD

Oh, yes! A long letter!

THE FATHER

And you put it in the chimney last night?

THE CHILD

(Nodding)

Right in front: where he had to see it.

THE MOTHER

Perhaps Santa Claus has taken the letter already,
Donald.

THE CHILD

Would he take the letter?

THE FATHER

(With a wink at the mother)

Well, how would he read it otherwise?

THE CHILD

I'll see!

(He runs upstairs.)

THE FATHER

(Turning to the mother with a laugh)

I went straight through his list for him: got him everything he wanted.

(He pulls the letter out of his pocket.)

THE MOTHER

(Sitting on the arm of his chair and looking over his shoulder)

The pop-gun?

THE FATHER

Yes. They've got a new kind that's perfectly safe.

THE MOTHER

And the *(she is evidently quoting)* real electric motor?

THE FATHER

The genuine article.

THE MOTHER

And—and—— What on earth is that?

THE FATHER

(Taking the letter)

What?

THE MOTHER

(Pointing)

Y—r.

THE FATHER

*(Laughing uproariously)*Don't *you* know?

THE MOTHER

(At a loss)

Y—r?

THE FATHER

Yes. *(She shakes her head.)* When I was a boy
y—r spelled “wire”!

THE MOTHER

(Laughing)

Oh!

THE FATHER

Thank the Lord, I'm not so educated that I don't remember that! Well, I got it: the whole business! It's all under your bed. I had to hide it coming in, or he'd have seen it. *(He laughs happily.)* You know, I'm enjoying it as much as he is! Playing Santa Claus!

THE MOTHER

I believed in him until I was a girl of eleven.

THE FATHER

No?

THE MOTHER

Really.

THE FATHER

And your folks never let on?

THE MOTHER

Never a word. They enjoyed it as much as you do.

THE FATHER

Funny, isn't it? What pleasure we get out of it? I wonder why? I think it's because you enjoy fooling somebody.

THE MOTHER

Well, Donald enjoys being fooled.

THE FATHER

But he doesn't know it.

THE MOTHER

(Nodding)

Yes. That's why he enjoys it.

THE CHILD

(Running downstairs)

Father! Mother!

THE MOTHER

(Rising anxiously)

Look out, Donald, you'll fall!

THE CHILD

(Reaching the landing safely)

Mother! The letter's gone!

THE FATHER

You don't mean it!

THE MOTHER

Of course it's gone!

THE FATHER

Santa must have taken it.

THE CHILD

Do you think so, father?

THE FATHER

He's got to read it, hasn't he?

THE CHILD

Y—es.

THE FATHER

Then he has to see if he's got everything you want.
So he comes the night before.

THE CHILD

Oh! And will he give me all I want?

THE MOTHER

If you've been a good boy, Donald.

THE CHILD

How do you know?

THE FATHER

We *don't* know. We hope so! Isn't that right, Mary? We hope so!

THE CHILD

(*Hesitantly*)

I asked for an awful lot.

THE FATHER

(*Restraining his laughter with difficulty*)

Well! Well!

THE CHILD

A motor—and a bag of marbles—(*the mother glances apprehensively at the father, afraid that he has forgotten this important item, but he nods imperceptibly, and continues to nod as the child goes through his list*)—and a first baseman's glove—and a pop-gun—and a game—and candy—and—and——
(*He stops to think.*)

THE MOTHER

(*Smiling at his earnestness*)

What else, Donald?

THE CHILD

I guess that's all.

THE FATHER

(Laughing)

If you don't ask for anything, you never get anything. Now, you just wait till to-morrow!

THE CHILD

To-morrow?

THE FATHER

And we'll see what Santa Claus has brought you.

THE CHILD

Oh! (*A variety of expressions play over his earnest little face.*) May I get up early?

THE MOTHER

As early as you like.

THE CHILD

But if I don't wake in time?

THE FATHER

You will if you go to bed now. (*As the child hesitates.*) And I'll rap on your door at six o'clock.

THE CHILD

(Reassured)

Don't forget! Good-night, father.

(He shakes hands.)

THE FATHER

Good-night, son.

THE CHILD

Good-night, mother.

THE MOTHER

(Kissing him)

Sleep tight, dear.

THE CHILD

(Stopping on his way to the stairs)

Father?

THE FATHER

Yes?

THE CHILD

Have you ever *seen* Santa Claus?

THE FATHER

(Amused)

Seen him?

THE CHILD

Really and truly seen him yourself?

THE FATHER

No: I can't say I have.

THE CHILD

Then how do you know there is one?

THE FATHER

Well——

THE CHILD

If you never saw him?

THE FATHER

My father told me about him.

THE CHILD

Did *he* ever see him?

THE FATHER

No.

THE CHILD

Then how did *he* know?

THE FATHER

Well, *his* father told him about him.

THE CHILD

Oh!

THE FATHER

And he learnt from *his* father, and so on, and so on,
way, way back.

THE CHILD

Oh. (*He thinks.*) Does that make it true?

THE FATHER

Well——

(*He is a little nonplussed*)

THE MOTHER

(*Coming to the rescue*)

Yes, Donald.

THE CHILD

But way, way, *way* back—didn't anybody ever see him?

THE MOTHER

Perhaps——

THE CHILD

(*After a pause*)

If I grow up, and I have a little boy, and I tell him something, and *he* grows up and tells *his* little boy something, does that make it true?

THE FATHER

(*Laughing*)

It's time to go to bed, Donald.

THE CHILD

(*Persisting*)

But does it make it true?

THE FATHER

I'll tell you to-morrow, Donald.

THE CHILD

(Looks around in perplexity. Then:)

Good-night. *(He goes.)*

(There is a pause. Father and mother watch the child with visible pride as it climbs out of sight. Then:)

THE FATHER

Bright boy, isn't he? *My* boy!

THE MOTHER

(Coming to his side)

And mine!

THE FATHER

(Laughing reminiscently)

"Does that make it true?"

THE MOTHER

Well, *does* it?

THE FATHER

As if it mattered!

THE MOTHER

Mattered?

THE FATHER

A child can ask questions which a wise man can't answer.

THE MOTHER

But a child has beliefs.

THE FATHER

At that age?

THE MOTHER

At any age. I can't help thinking that the sooner its beliefs are *true* beliefs, the better.

THE FATHER

(*Surprised*)

Are you serious, Mary?

THE MOTHER

(*Nodding*)

It strikes home sometimes. We're all of us children—we "grown-ups." It just depends on the point of view. And we believe exactly what our fathers tell us. Only we don't ask as many questions as children ask—and we're not so easily satisfied with the answers. But when we *do* ask questions——!

(*She breaks off abruptly.*)

THE FATHER

Mary!

THE MOTHER

(Shrugging her shoulders)

I'll get the things.

(She goes off into the bedroom at the side.)

THE FATHER

(Puzzled)

What do you mean, Mary? *(As she does not answer:)* What on earth do you mean?

THE MOTHER

(Returning with an armful of bundles)

Here is a stocking, Philip. And here are the presents.

THE FATHER

(Pinning the stocking to the mantel, and arranging the bulkier presents on a nearby table)

What did you mean by what you said before?

THE MOTHER

(Shaking her head)

You mightn't understand, Philip. *(She seats herself, and watches him.)* You know, when I found out that my parents had been fooling me about Santa Claus, I resented it.

THE FATHER

At the age of eleven?

THE MOTHER

Yes. Very much. That's why I wanted you to tell the truth to Donald long ago.

THE FATHER

(Vibrating between the stocking and the table)

And spoil his pleasure? There's always time for that.

THE MOTHER

He's as old as I was when I found out. You see, the girls I went around with explained: explained very cruelly, as they explained other things a few years later. My parents never explained anything.

THE FATHER

Would you put the marbles in the stocking?

THE MOTHER

Yes. At the bottom. *(As he proceeds rather awkwardly.)* Take the stocking off the mantel. Don't pin it up until you've filled it. *(She pauses.)* It's a peculiar world a child lives in. A world where everything is mysterious and strange, but where everything is terribly real. A world where everyone believes: where everyone questions: where any answer passes for truth. It's a world—come to think of it—very much like our own world. *(She rises slowly and goes to a window, where she pushes aside the curtains and peers out.)* Enough snow in sight to satisfy even Santa Claus, Philip.

THE FATHER

(Who has been so busy arranging the table that he has not listened to her)

There! How does that look?

THE MOTHER

(Dutifully admiring)

Very nice, Philip. *(She moves towards the bedroom.)* Coming to bed soon?

THE FATHER

In a few minutes.

THE MOTHER

All right.

(She goes out.)

(The father gives the finishing touches to his work; stands off to survey it; pins the bulging stocking to the mantel. Meanwhile the child, dressed in nightgown and slippers, has come downstairs. For an instant the father does not see him, and continues. Then the child, with a kind of a gasp, comes up to him.)

THE CHILD

Father!

THE FATHER

Eh? Donald? But you ought to be in bed!

THE CHILD

I came down to see.

THE FATHER

You shouldn't have done that.

THE CHILD

Father! There isn't any Santa Claus!

THE FATHER

Well, well, so that's it? (*He breaks into a peal of laughter.*) You had to find it out sooner or later, didn't you?

THE CHILD

You and mother have been giving me——? (*The father nods.*) Why didn't you tell me?

THE FATHER

Why? Because my father did the same thing, Donald. (*The child's lip quivers. The father seats himself near the fire.*) Come here, Donald. (*He takes him on his lap.*) Once a year, Donald, we celebrate Christmas. And because we want all the children to be happy when Christmas comes, we tell them this story: that there is a Santa Claus, who loves children, and brings them presents, so that they shall be happy. I believed it when I was a boy, and when you are a man you will tell it to your *little* boy.

THE CHILD

Even if it isn't true?

THE FATHER

(Nodding)

Because it's a beautiful story. Because it will make your children happy just as it has made *you* happy.

THE CHILD

But if I don't believe it myself?

THE FATHER

You will want them to believe it.

THE CHILD

Why?

THE FATHER

Because it will make them happy.

THE CHILD

Oh! (*After a pause.*) It's better to be happy than——

THE FATHER

Than what?

THE CHILD

Than to know what's true, isn't it?

THE FATHER

(After a pause)

Sometimes, Donald. Yes. Sometimes.

THE CHILD

So all fathers tell their children stories like that.

THE FATHER

(Nodding)

They are beautiful stories.

THE CHILD

(After a pause)

Nora told me the Bogie Man lived in the dark.
That wasn't a beautiful story.

THE FATHER

(Smiling)

Well?

THE CHILD

Is it true?

THE FATHER

No.

THE CHILD

Then why did she tell me?

THE FATHER

Because somebody told her that when she was a child.

THE CHILD

They were fooling her, weren't they?

THE FATHER

Perhaps they believed it.

THE CHILD

Even if it wasn't true?

THE FATHER

Perhaps they didn't know.

THE CHILD

Oh! (*He thinks.*) So some day somebody'll tell them they've been fooling them—like about Santa Claus.

THE FATHER

Perhaps.

THE CHILD

And then they'll tell Nora, and Nora'll tell me. (*He pauses.*) But if they don't tell Nora?

THE FATHER

It's time for you to be in bed, Donald.

THE CHILD

But I want to know! Nora says somebody'll die if you break a mirror. Is that true?

THE FATHER

No.

THE CHILD

Nora's been fooling me.

THE FATHER

Because somebody else has been fooling her. You must remember that silly people invent reasons for things they can't understand. Those aren't beautiful stories: we call them superstitions.

THE CHILD

Super——?

THE FATHER

Superstitions.

THE CHILD

Oh! So it isn't bad luck to spill the salt?

THE FATHER

Of course not.

THE CHILD

Or to walk under a ladder?

THE FATHER

(Smiling)

Where did you learn all of that rubbish?

THE CHILD

(Persisting)

And the stork?

THE FATHER

What do you mean? What stork?

THE CHILD

The stork that brings little babies?

THE FATHER

(Laughing)

There isn't any.

THE CHILD

Then how do they come?

THE FATHER

(Rising)

I'll explain that to you when you are older, Donald.

THE CHILD

Why not now?

THE FATHER

Because you wouldn't understand. Because there are some of the beautiful stories we don't explain until you are grown up. It won't be so long now, Donald. Then I'll tell you. *(He swings him up in the air.)* Good-night, son.

THE CHILD

(Fascinated by the sight of the full stocking and the Christmas presents as he looks over his father's shoulder.)

Oh! Is everything there?

THE FATHER

Everything!

THE CHILD

Everything I asked for?

THE FATHER

The marbles—and the pop-gun——

THE CHILD

And the first baseman's mitt?

THE FATHER

Yes. And the really, truly motor!

THE CHILD

Oh! And the candy?

THE FATHER

Just wait till to-morrow! *(He kisses him; carries him to the staircase and sets him down on the first step.)* Good-night, little man!

THE CHILD

(Running upstairs)

Good-night, father,

THE FATHER

(Stands in thought an instant; he smiles. Then, very softly, he calls upstairs:)

Good-night, little man!

(He extinguishes the lamps, and then, still smiling, crosses into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.)

(A pause. The room is lit only by the dying fire, and the furniture has resumed its grotesque dance. Then the white-clad figure of the child becomes visible on the stairs.)

THE CHILD

Father! *(There is no answer, but the child evidently takes a shadow in the corner of the room for the father.)* Father! I'm not going to say my prayers to-night! *(He pauses for an answer. There is none.)* Father! I know something else you've been fooling me about! You've been fooling me about God!

(He breaks into childish laughter. Then, suddenly, he sees that the room is empty. This is his opportunity. Noiselessly he crosses to the fireplace, removes the stocking, and walking softly so that he will not be heard, creeps upstairs with it.)

(A long pause.)

CURTAIN

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